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HOW TO CREATE SELLING E-COMMERCE WEBSITES

Imprint

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Preface

Designing and developing for e-commerce takes a lot of brain work, knowledge and research before you start. You don't only have to please your customer with a beautiful layout and a smart structure – you also have to make your client's customers easily understand what it's all about, thus providing for a great user experience and high conversion rates.

This book steps you through the preparation of your e-commerce projects, showing you what it takes to present merchandise as beautifully and convincingly, and how to run valid and successful A/B and multivariate testing of various designs.

These articles are a selection of the best from Smashing Magazine in 2009 and 2010 dealing with creating e-commerce websites. The articles have been carefully edited and prepared as a PDF version and versions for ePub and Mobipocket compatible e-book readers, such as the Apple iPad and Amazon Kindle. Some screenshots and links were removed in order to make the book easier to read and to print.

We have put this book together to give you all the information you need for successful e-commerce websites in one fell swoop. Enjoy and good luck with your work!

Manuela Müller and Thomas Burkert
Smashing eBook Editors

Getting Started With E-Commerce

By Rachel Andrew

The world of online sales, whether of products or services, can be daunting at first; the options seem confusing and the information conflicted. Yet as the designer or developer of an online store, you will need to guide your client through the maze of choices in order to get it up and running.

I have developed many e-commerce websites during my career as a Web developer. I've used and modified off-the-shelf software and have also developed custom solutions — so I know from experience that there are a number of important questions to answer before presenting possible solutions to a client. Getting all the pertinent information up front is vital if such a project is to run smoothly, and it can save you from delays during the process. It can also help you advise the client on whether they need a full custom cart or an open-source or off-the-shelf product.

This article responds to some questions you should be asking of your client before putting together a proposal for the development of an e-commerce website. I'll explain the most important things to think about in terms of taking payments and credit card security. It should give you enough information to be able to guide your client and to look up more detailed information about the aspects that apply to your particular situation.

What this article doesn't cover is the design and user experience side of creating an e-commerce website, because gathering this information would normally occur alongside the designing and branding of the website.

What You Need To Know

It is really tempting to select a solution based on something you have used before or perhaps after asking around to see what others recommend. But you can get stuck in a rut this way. Every online business has different needs, so one solution is unlikely to fit all. Before writing any code or trying an off-the-shelf package, you need to ask yourself or your client a few questions:

- What are you selling?
- What shopping functionality should you offer?
- How will you take payment?
- How will items be delivered?
- What reporting and other functionalities are required?

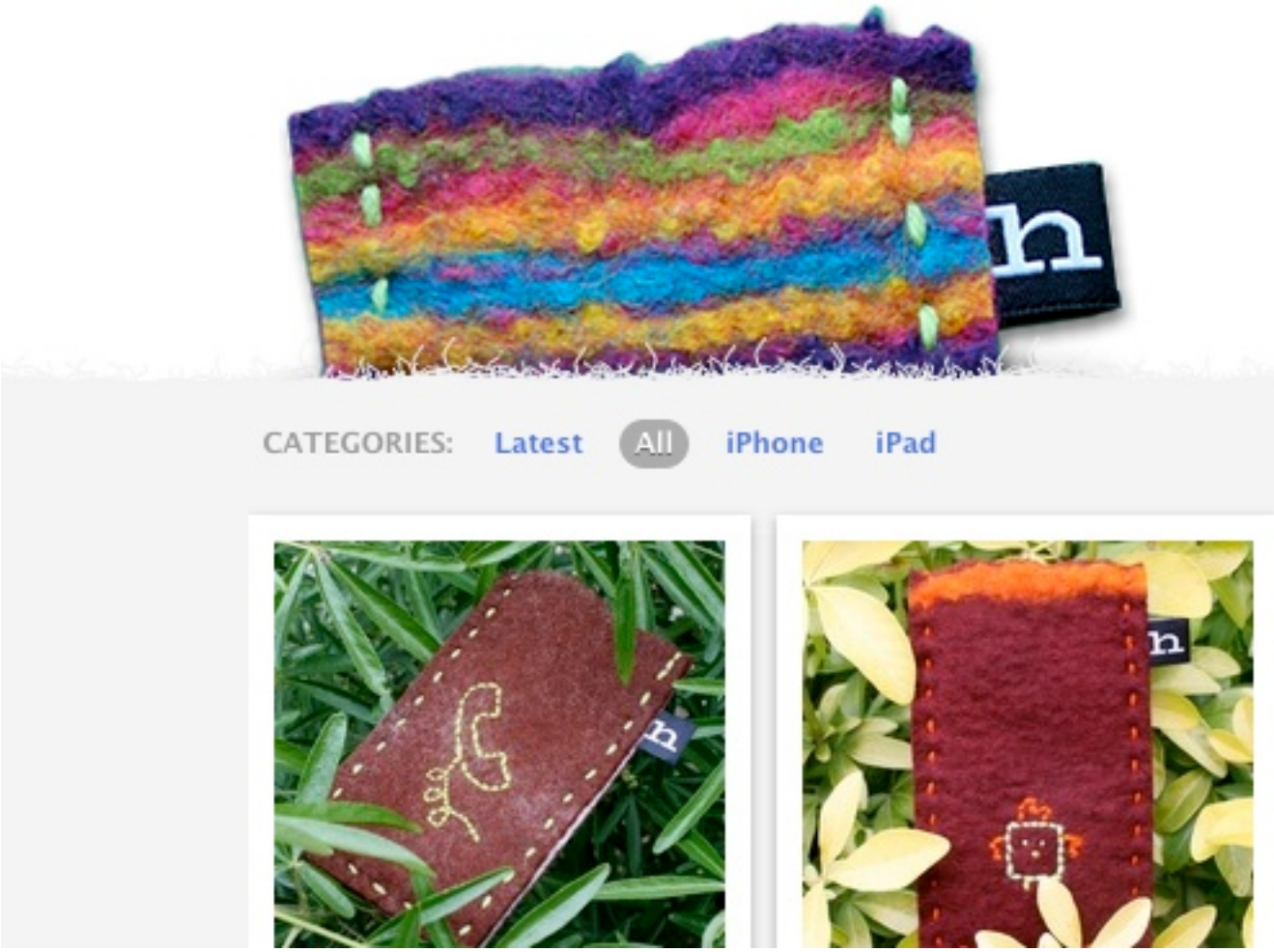
What Are You Selling?

Your online store may be selling physical products that are shipped by the postal service or a courier to the customer after a completed purchase. Or it might be selling products that are delivered electronically, such as e-book downloads, MP3 music or software. Donations and subscriptions are types of transactions to consider as well.

What Shopping Functionality Should You Offer?

Will you be selling a single item, (such as an e-book) or will visitors need to be able to browse and add multiple items to their cart? Are these items associated with distinct options? If you're selling t-shirts, for example, size and color might be options to include. Are categories needed to make

ordering easier? Will a given item be listed in only one category, or could it be found in several? Would the ability to tag items be useful, or the ability to link them to related items (thus allowing the store owner to promote accessories for items that the customer has added to their cart)?



Items on the Hicksmade website can be displayed in categories.

Will there be special offers on the website? Standards ones are "Buy one, get one free," "20% discount," "two for one" and "buy item x and get item y at half price." Setting up these kinds of offers can be quite complex if you are developing a custom system; and if you're buying an off-the-shelf solution for the store, then you'll need to know whether it supports them.

The devil (and the budget) is in the details. If your client is expecting particular functionality, find out about it now.

Accounts and Tracking Orders

Part of the user experience could include managing an account and tracking orders. Must users create accounts, or is it optional? Can they track their order and watch it move from "processing" to "shipped"? Account functionality must include basic management functions, such as the ability to reset a forgotten password and to update contact details.

How Will You Take Payment?

You'll likely need to accept credit and debit card payments from customers. There are a number of options that range in complexity and expense.

PayPal

PayPal is a straightforward way to take payments online. The advantages are that creating a PayPal account is easy, it doesn't require a credit check, and integration can be as simple as hardcoding a button on your page or as involved as full integration. *Google Checkout* offers a similar service (and a similarly low barrier to entry), as does Amazon (in the US) through *Amazon Payments*.

Using A Merchant Account

To accept card payments directly, rather than through services like PayPal, you will need an Internet Merchant Account. This enables you to take credit card payments and process the money to your bank account. If you have an existing merchant account for face-to-face or telephone sales, though, you will not be able to use it for online transactions. Internet transactions are riskier. So, to start trading online, you'll need to contact your bank. The bank will require that you take payments securely, in most circumstances via a payment service provider (or PSP, sometimes called a payment gateway).

What you should definitely *not* do is store card details in order to enter them in an offline PDQ later. This would be against the terms of the merchant agreement. So, unless you have written permission from your bank saying you are allowed to do this, and you're complying with the PCI DSS, just don't.

The Payment Gateway

The purpose of the payment gateway is to take the card payment of your customer, validate the card number and amount and then pass the payment to your bank securely. You can interact with a payment gateway in two ways:

- **Via a pay page**
  The user moves from your website to a secure page on the payment gateway server to enter their details.

- **Via API integration**
  The user enters their card details on your website (on a page with a secure certificate installed, running SSL), and those details are then passed to the gateway. Your website acts as the intermediary; the user is not aware of the bank transaction happening, having seen it only via your website.

The advantage of pay page integration is that your website never touches the card details, so you are not liable for the customer's security. The most significant disadvantage is that you lose some control over the payment process, because the final step requires gathering all the details to pass to the payment server. In addition, you are often unable to customize the payment screen, even if only to upload a logo.

Store owners are often concerned about this break in the user experience: they fear the user will bail before going to the payment page on *WorldPay* or another server. But transferring your user to a known banking website where they'll enter their card details might actually give them confidence in the legitimacy of your website. When I deal with an unknown website (perhaps a small retailer) and it asks me to enter my card details, I immediately worry about how it will handle them. Does the website email my card details in clear text? Will the details be stored in a database somewhere by the website? Even if the page has a secure certificate and checks out, I still have no idea what happens to my details after I hit "Submit" on the form. If the final step of checking out takes me to a known PSP page, then I can be confident that my details are safe and the small website isn't handling them at all. I trust WorldPay with my details far more than I trust Joe Blogg's Widget Store.

Another useful argument for using a pay page is that, should there be any changes in card payment regulations, these will be handled by the PSP. For example, 3-D Secure (verified by Visa or MasterCard SecureCode) was instituted recently. It requires that users verify their payment on a page related to their bank before it can be authorized. If you had API integration, you would need to edit your code to ready it for 3-D Secure; whereas on payment page websites, those changes are done by the PSP.

These points have encouraged many website owners to reconsider their reluctance to use a pay page — most realize that being responsible for credit card details is more trouble than it's worth.

Pay page integration should work with most off-the-shelf software. After payment is made, it typically sends back something that enables your website — which has a script running for this — to identify the user and the transaction and perform any post-purchase processing that may be needed (such as marking an order as "Paid" in the database or giving access to an electronic download).

The advantage of full API integration is that you control the payment process from beginning to end, including the look and feel of the payment pages. However, you are also responsible for the security of the user's card details, and regulations require that you prove you are following best practices.

PCI DSS

The Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI DSS) is a set of 12 requirements that must by complied with by all businesses that accept credit and debit card payments. This doesn't just cover online transactions; a street store that takes payments online must also comply with the PCI DSS for both their offline and online payment methods.

If you are just taking online payments via a pay page and do not take, process or store any card details at any time, then you can complete the shortened PCI DSS questionnaire (SAQ A) to confirm that your PSP is PCI DSS-compliant. If you use API integration, then you'll be need to comply fully with the PCI DSS — even if you do not store the details — including by allowing quarterly security scans that check ongoing compliance. Explaining PCI DSS compliance in detail is beyond the scope of this article, but if you're involved in a project that takes card details without a pay page, then you should acquaint yourself with it — or take on the services of someone who already knows it.

Storing Card Data

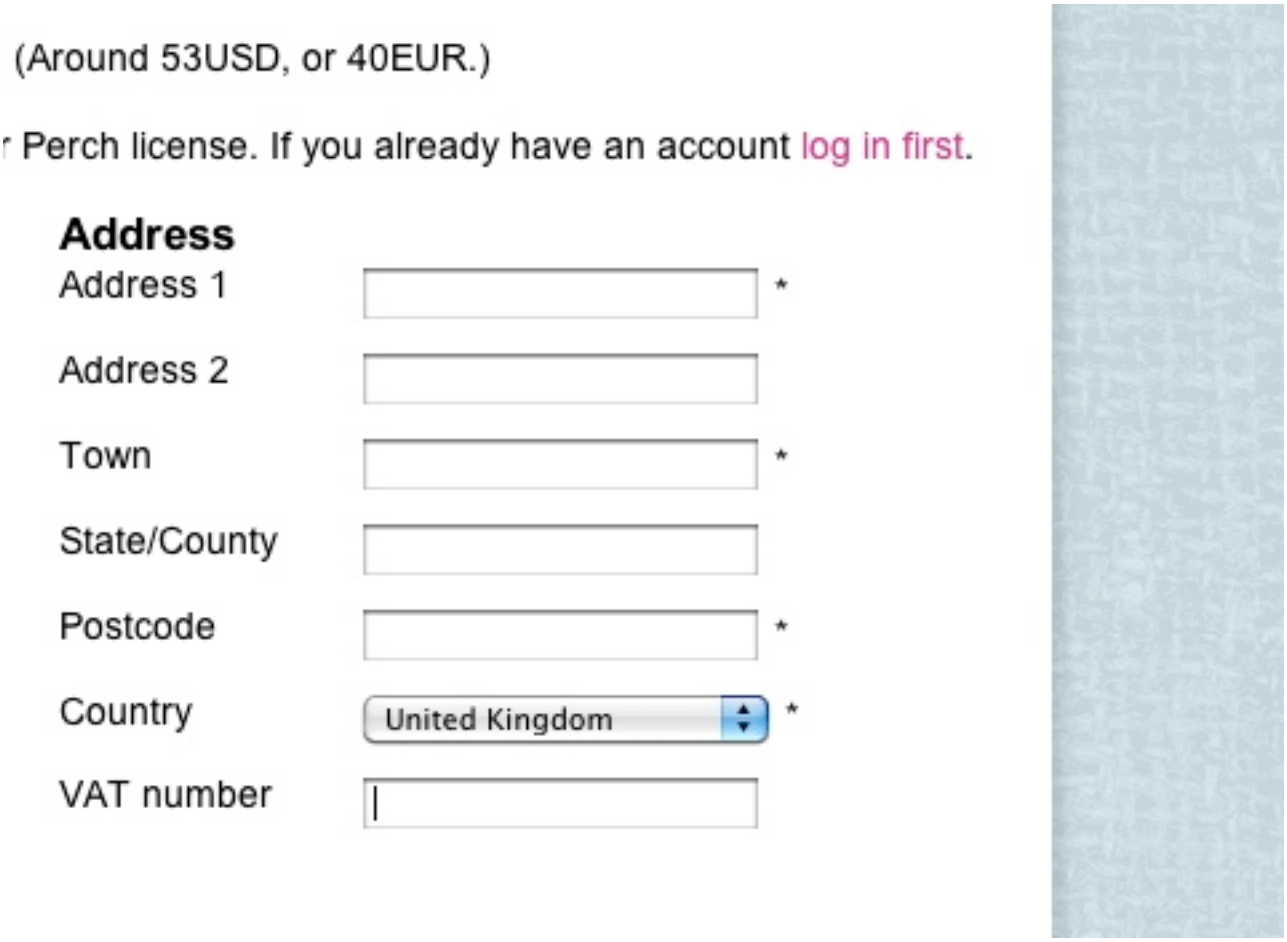
I would strongly advise any designer or developer against storing card data on their website server, even in encrypted form. Storing card data will, of course, require you to comply with the PCI DSS and to maintain a server and network capable of keeping this data safe. If you need the data of card holders for recurring billing, for example, some payment gateways offer data storage services.

If you are considering storing card data only for "one-click" ordering (as Amazon does), please be careful. Do you really want to be liable for your customer's data? Are you willing to deal with the extra and ongoing expenses that maintaining compliance will require?

Multiple Currencies and Local Taxes

You'll likely need to account for local taxes or VAT in Europe. Understanding exactly what taxes you need to collect can be difficult enough, but you also need to ensure that your system can process them correctly. For example, my company has a downloadable product, a mini CMS called *Perch*. Our company is registered in the UK, so we need to collect VAT from UK buyers.

We also need to collect VAT from EU (European Union) buyers, *unless* they have a valid VAT number. If the buyer is outside the EU, then we don't need to charge VAT. So, our system has to allow for validation of VAT numbers as well as for the correct calculation of price with and without VAT. If you find yourself in a similar situation, then the European VAT Number Validation API (written by Aral Balkan) will be helpful.



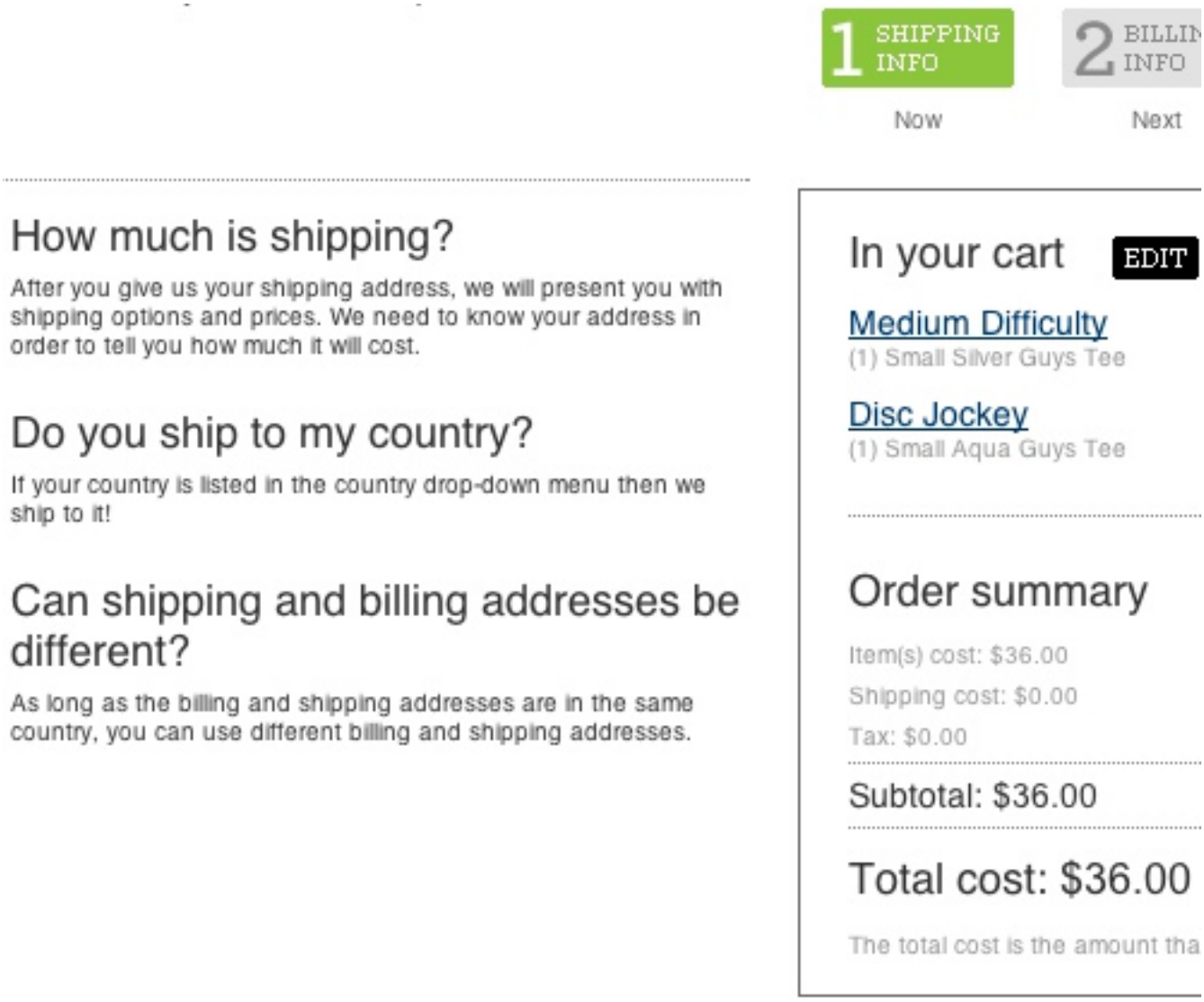
Collecting the VAT Number here triggers the VAT Number Validation process so that we can determine whether to charge VAT.

Most stores take payment in a single currency. If you want to accept multi-currency payments — that is, allow visitors to select their regional currency, see pricing and make a payment in that currency — you will need to set the desired currencies in your merchant account. Another option is to get an

up-to-date exchange rate and display prices in other currencies while accepting payment only in your local currency. You can either update these exchange rates manually or use data from an API to do automatic currency conversions. If the user will be paying in your currency and not theirs, then they will need to understand that the prices displayed are solely informational and that the actual price may differ slightly (owing to fluctuating exchange rates).

What About Delivery?

If you are selling physical items that need to be shipped, you'll need to charge somehow for the shipping costs and perhaps arrange for order-tracking. Because you're selling online, you may attract customers from other countries, so you'll need to decide how to calculate shipping for different destinations. Otherwise, limit potential buyers to people in your country or a small group of countries.


1 SHIPPING INFO
2 BILLIN INFO
Now
Next
How much is shipping?
After you give us your shipping address, we will present you with shipping options and prices. We need to know your address in order to tell you how much it will cost.
Do you ship to my country?
If your country is listed in the country drop-down menu then we ship to it!
Can shipping and billing addresses be different?
As long as the billing and shipping addresses are in the same country, you can use different billing and shipping addresses.
In your cart
EDIT
Medium Difficulty
(1) Small Silver Guys Tee
Disc Jockey
(1) Small Aqua Guys Tee
Order summary
Item(s) cost: $36.00
Shipping cost: $0.00
Tax: $0.00
Subtotal: $36.00
Total cost: $36.00
The total cost is the amount tha

Threadless explains to the user how shipping works and then presents shipping options based on the user's mailing address.

Typically, websites offer free shipping for orders of a certain price or higher. They also typically offer shipping with different carriers, such as by regular post or by priority courier (depending on when the user wants to receive the item). Consider these things when planning your website.

Digital Products

When customers buy a digital item (an e-book, music download or software) they expect to be able to download their item quickly after purchase. For digital products, delivery takes the form of a link or a page in their profile where the product can be downloaded (and a license code issued if required).

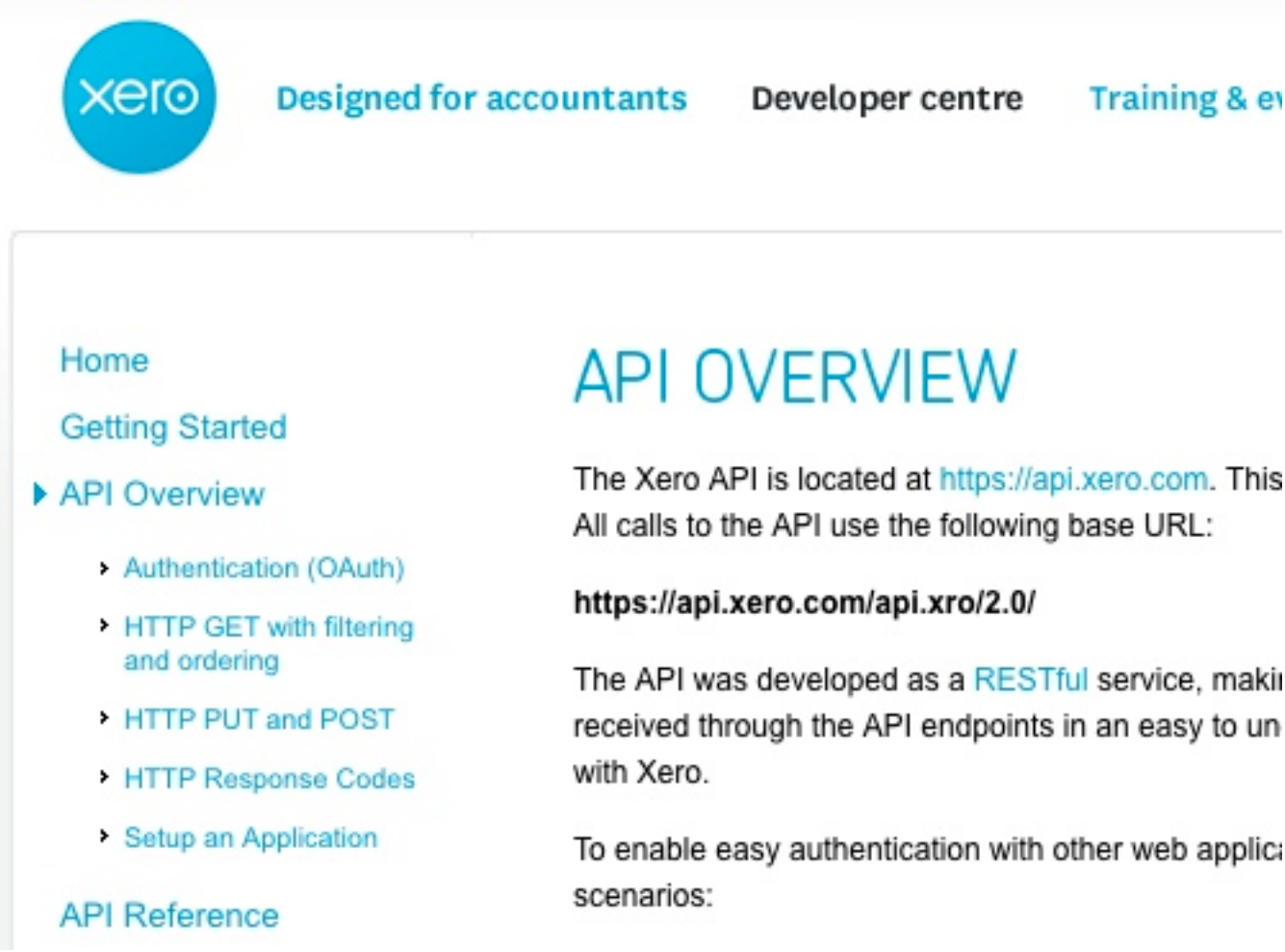
Your system will need to be able to secure products prior to download and provide an account — or at least an emailed link — through which the download can be accessed. When selling software, you may also need to generate a product code.

Reporting And Other Functionality

Your client will need to receive and process orders as they come in, and they might also need to mark items as shipped as they are processed. Some form of download to CSV would likely be helpful to allow a mail-merge of data onto address labels, as would the ability to import to an offline accounting system of payment information. Other questions to ask your client are:

- Do you need the system to be linked to any other systems (for example, a system running in a street shop or an accounting package with particular data requirements)?
- Do you need to be able to control stock through the website?
- How do you want to deal with orders that you can only partially fulfill?
- Will the website generate invoices or will this happen offline?

Most successful store owners will want to automate their accounting processes eventually in order to avoid duplicating data when calculating their year-end accounts. Many accounting systems have an API that allow you to send transactions from the store automatically to the accounting package.



Accounting systems with APIs, such as Xero, make it simpler to tie website orders to accounts.

Finding Your Solution

With all the above questions answered (in addition to thinking about the design — i.e. the look and feel of the store itself), you are in a position to prepare a solution that suits your client's needs. Your options are either to develop something yourself (or contract a developer to do so) or to select an off-the-shelf system that meets as many of your needs as possible either on its own or with modifications.

With e-commerce, you can always start small. Begin with a simple solution or a simple payment method, and then move on to more complex solutions as you start to get a return on your investment. Including many features right away is tempting, but your goal is to make money, not to spend it. Testing the water before spending a fortune is perfectly acceptable.

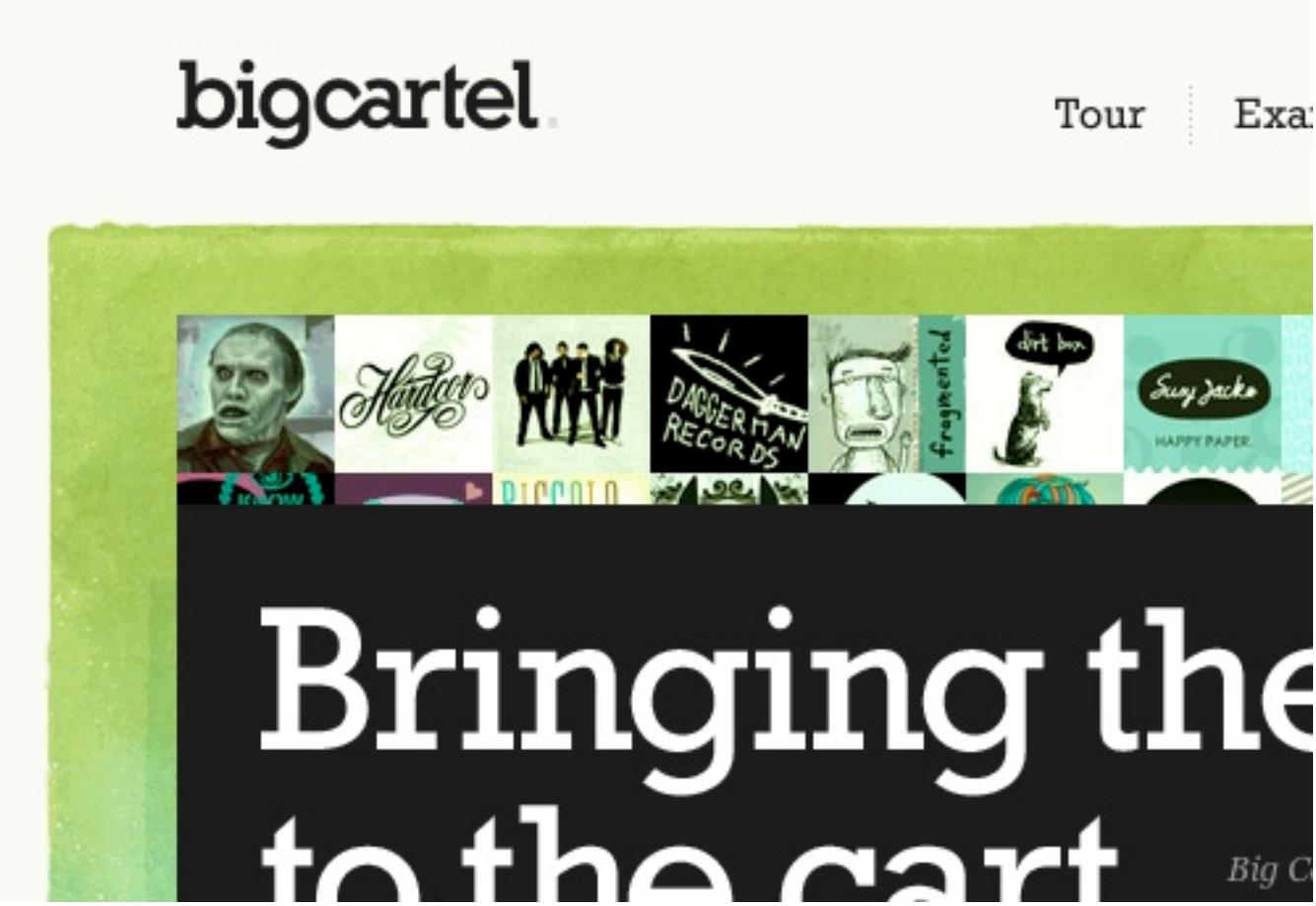
Keep It Simple

First, be sure of your actual needs. For example, if you are selling a single product, then you won't need a shopping cart; all you'll need is a way for customers to pay. At the most basic level, this could be a PayPal "Buy Now" button on an HTML page, or your own form that posts the data to a PSP pay page. You could test the waters with PayPal's "Buy Now" buttons for just a few products, using PayPal as a simple shopping cart.

Online Solutions

If you need more than a few PayPal or Google Checkout buttons but would rather not invest time or money in installing an e-commerce solution, then hosted solutions are available. Selling online becomes more straightforward when someone else worries about the complexities of the cart.

Popular hosted products include *Shopify* and *Foxy Cart*. Both of these services allow you to create a store, hosted on their servers, for a monthly fee. Some hosted solutions target a particular market and are therefore more likely to have features that the market wants. A good example of this is Big Cartel, a shopping cart for artists.



The Big Cartel website.

There are also specialist services that assist with the delivery of digital purchases such as e-books and software. *Fetch* is a hosted application that integrates with Shopify and other carts to deliver digital purchases.

You should be able to get up and running quickly with a hosted solution. But hosted solutions come with a few disadvantages: usually a monthly fee, limited customization, and the prospect that users will have to visit three websites to complete their purchase (your website, a hosted cart and a pay page). To keep things simple, though, it can be a great solution, especially in the early stages of a business.

Commercial and Open-Source Products

There is a huge range of off-the-shelf e-commerce products that you can download and install yourself, including plug-ins for CMS systems. When assessing these systems, check each one against your list of essential and ideal features. You don't want to buy something that isn't the best fit. Most software will have a demo website set up as a basic installation that you can play with to see what options are available. If you have a comprehensive list, it will be easier to see whether your needs are supported.

The Open Source CMS website has an *e-commerce category* that allows you to try out a number of open-source systems from one location, including the popular *Magento* and *osCommerce* applications.

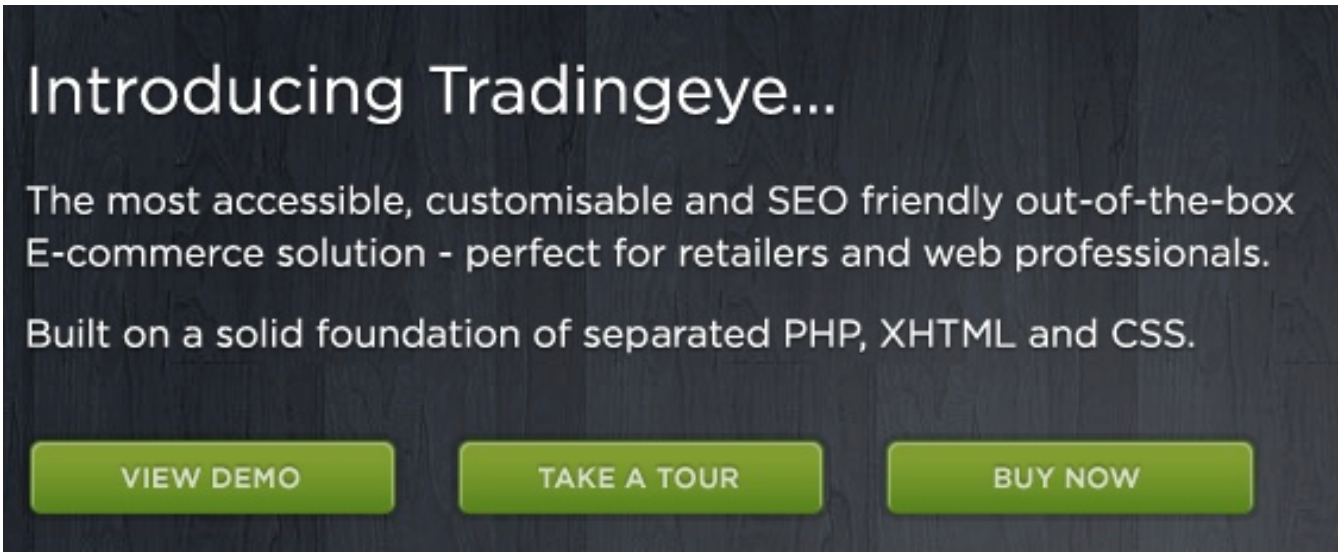
With a store-bought system, consider whether creating templates or changing the look and feel are feasible. Some systems enforce their website design and thus compromise yours. You should also look at the mark-up generated by the system; will your pages still validate? How accessible and usable will the store be for visitors?

One problem with many popular existing systems is their reliance on JavaScript, both in administration and in the shopping experience. While JavaScript can greatly enhance the user experience, it should only be used as an enhancement. That is, your website should have basic functionality (e.g. purchasing and checking out) without JavaScript, even if the

experience is less smooth. The popular Magento Cart requires that users enable JavaScript in order to *add products* to their cart; an article in the Magento wiki suggests that you display a message asking users to turn on JavaScript. Paul Boag recently wrote an article about Business Catalyst and its lack of support for users without JavaScript.

If you are tied to a particular payment method or PSP, make sure the product supports that method. Also, make sure the product allows you to comply with your local legal and tax requirements.

When assessing a product, find out what support is available. Open-source products might offer a community forum; check that the forum is active and the community helpful. For commercial products, find out what support you can expect after buying a license. Finally, check how frequently the product is upgraded. If the latest version is two years old, newer payment methods might not be supported.


Introducing Tradingeye...
The most accessible, customisable and SEO friendly out-of-the-box E-commerce solution - perfect for retailers and web professionals.
Built on a solid foundation of separated PHP, XHTML and CSS.
VIEW DEMO
TAKE A TOUR
BUY NOW

With Trading Eye, you must purchase support credits in order to get product support

A Note on Modifying Commercial Products

If you can't find an off-the-shelf product that meets your needs, it can be very tempting to grab whatever nearly does and start hacking away, trying to force it to fit your requirements. I urge caution when doing this: by modifying the basic source code, you might make the product very difficult to upgrade — because upgrading to a new version could overwrite your changes. Keeping up with security upgrades is also important; a compromise in a widely used system can attack many websites.

Many open-source products have a plug-in architecture that allows supported modifications and additions that can be upgraded. If you decide to modify an existing product, look for one with a good plug-in system and a helpful community. You could even offer your plug-in back to the community when it is ready for those with similar needs.

Developing Your Own Solution

Sometimes the only way to get the features or create the user experience you want is to develop your own solution. In this case, the requirements list that you created earlier will help you develop a specification before starting work or hiring a developer to build the solution for you.

MySoti offers many color options and types and sizes of t-shirts.

Custom e-commerce systems are prone to scope creep, because there are so many potential elements of functionality to develop, and clients tend to expect a clone of Amazon! By outlining exactly how shipping, special offers, categorization of offers and so on will work, you keep the client's expectations and yours in line. A well-built system should be able to extend as time goes on. I encourage clients to develop only what they need to begin, rather than spend a fortune on bells and whistles "just in case."

"Special offers" is a good example of this. You could develop a system that lets the client create many combinations of special offers, which would require a complex user interface and a lot of logic. But in most cases, the client would use such a system minimally. A lot of time and money would be saved by creating only what is needed, but building it in such a way that it can be modified later if desired.

Conclusion

I hope this article has clarified some of the technical considerations of developing an e-commerce website. I enjoy e-commerce projects; they're a great opportunity to help clients develop their businesses online, and it's nice to see quantifiable results as people start making purchases. When you create a solid set of requirements based on real business needs and match them with great design and care for the user experience, you build a website that increases sales — and you enable another business to grow. That is a satisfying thing to do.

5 Universal Principles For Successful E-Commerce-Sites

By Jeffrey Olson

When was the last time you called customer support because you were having problems checking out online? Probably never! Cart abandonment rate is at around 60%, and most of it happens before the user even begins the checkout process. Sometimes, convincing your customers to trust you is your biggest challenge.

There is no "Consumer Trust for Dummies," but as e-commerce designers, we need to focus on some fundamentals. The following topics may seem as obvious as walking into a seven-foot Wookie, but rest assured you will find plenty of websites with a mouth full of fur.

1. Paint Your Pictures At Home

If your core demographic is women between the ages 35 and 65 who have an annual income of $60,000+, you would treat them different than the 18- to 25-year-old male demographic. First and foremost in e-tail: forcing your visitor to think is a bad idea. When creativity stops being subjective and can be measured by a dollar amount, making sure you're designing for the customer is a no-brainer.

Years ago, I had an SVP of DotCom tell my team, "You can go home if you want to paint pictures." And for the rest of the day, I couldn't wait to get there so that I could make sure the next morning his inbox was full of expletive material illegal in most counties. After calming down, I realized he was right. All along, what he was telling us was simply to design for the

customer and not ourselves. This was a challenge for designers working in an e-commerce corporate atmosphere but a very important lesson to learn.

2. Good UX Is Like A Perfect Movie Score

Build brand loyalty to gain patient, forgiving customers for a lifetime. For instance, Apple's customer loyalty exceeds all other brands with an unusual cult following. Apple lovers forgive the company when it makes mistakes and zealously defend the company's products and reputation.

How do you make your customers trust you this much? The answer is to give the user an "Experience." It is not enough simply to make a website usable. The experience you create for the customer has to make them not realize that they are "using" it. It's a tough concept to grasp, and the recipe changes from website to website, but the right combination of usability, creative design, writing, psychology and metrics and a strong brand will create an experience through which your customers learn to trust you.

Like the perfect score to a film, a good user experience is unobtrusive and transparent to the consumer because "it just works." The Apple model will not work for everyone, but I often find myself challenged with a W.W.J.D. moment. Ask, "What would Jobs do?" and then look at other websites for inspiration.

3. E-Commerce UX Pitfalls To Avoid

Just because a website is usable, does not mean customers will use it. Usability and user experience are in the same family, but more often than not user experience is the forgotten child. There are key areas in which the two must co-exist. Below are suggestions for some areas where websites should spend as much, if not more time, on the user experience.

Product Detail page

The product detail (PD) page is where some retail websites drop the ball. Too much focus is put on the design and usability of the home page, and that effort does not continue through to the rest of the website. More of the user's time is spent on the product detail page than any other. Here, you need to offer customers all of the information they are looking for but present it in an intelligent way as well.

A few recent trends on e-commerce websites are "no-click" alternate images and swatches. A user simply has to roll over an image, without clicking, to get immediate feedback. The same approach can be used to zoom in to the image. Other UX options for the PD page are smart fields that let users know they still have to perform a required action before proceeding, without getting a typical error message.

The Checkout Process

Much like the PD page, the checkout process is a critical piece that engages the customer on a somewhat intimate level. However, unlike the PD page, where customers want to spend time to make sure they want what they are looking at, the checkout process should have as few steps as possible. Too many steps and the customer feels trapped.

But too quick and they feel like they have lost control. For instance, asking for credit card information too soon will seem out of order and no doubt scare even the most seasoned online shopper into abandoning their cart. Hidden taxes and shipping costs will make them feel like you are trying to take advantage of them.

Security

Always making sure your customer knows that your website is secure and that their privacy will never be compromised goes back to the issue of trust. It does not take much effort to display a message telling your customers that they are safe in your hands; a footer link to your privacy policy is not always enough.

Page Weight

A page's weight is determined by its file size, by adding up every image, every line of code and anything that gets loaded when the user first hits the page. Libraries such as Scriptaculous, jQuery, MooTools and even Flash Shared Objects are often forgotten, but they all add to a page's "weight."

Some fascinating things are on the horizon for developers related to user experience and page weight. One notable development as of late was the release of web browsers, which has support for HTML 5 media tags, CSS animation and CSS effects. As more and more of these features become standard in browsers across the board, we can look forward to offering users a better experience by using features directly in the browser.

4. The Value Of Content And Then SoMe

We cannot talk about user experience without touching on content and social media (SoMe). In order to be profitable, e-commerce retailers need to engage customers with their content and use social media outlets within and outside their own websites.

93% of social media users believe a company should have a presence in social media, according to Cone, while an overwhelming 85% believe a

company should not only have a presence in but also interact with its consumers via social media.

- 60% of all online adults use social media.
- 56% of users feel a stronger connection with, and feel better served by, companies when they can interact with them in a social media environment.

When a website such as Facebook, which just turned 6 years old in February, has an active user base of over 500 million people, it is easy to see the unlimited potential to increase your wallet share simply by giving your customers what they want. Some options are:

- Give your customer the ability to add your website or product detail pages to websites such as Delicious, StumpleUpon, Digg, Twitter and Facebook.
- Give them the ability to customize their experience on your website. These experiences can range from customizing the home page as they see fit to uploading their image to go beside their product reviews.
- Create an RSS feed for your website. If your website has a blog or some other content area that changes regularly, give your customers the option to add it to their favorite RSS reader.

They say, “Content is king,” but if you cannot account for your king’s whereabouts, he needs to be beheaded. Your website’s content is only as relevant as its success. So, test as much as you can. Some tests you can perform to get hard data include:

- **Website and email A/B testing**
  Split your promotion views between your customers. 50% see version A, and 50% see version B. You can perform these tests for just about any purpose, but make sure your goals are clear before beginning. Figure out what you are trying to solve, and then move forward with the testing. From changing your website's navigation to simply testing the style of your promotion's copy, doing an A/B test will give you the relevant data you need to decide whether to update or remain the same.
- **Polls**
  Polls are quick and simple but, depending on your pool of users, can give you mountains of data. To get more people to take your poll, consider giving some kind of incentive to participate. Some polls are fun to take, but if you're asking, "Which brand of television is better?" and not, "Who's hotter, Jessica Simpson or Britney Spears?" then you may want to think more carefully about how much the feedback is worth.

5. Using Type And Color To Influence

Using color and typography is nothing new to designers. Using them in e-commerce is not much different. When designing for a retail website, your client is the customer. You are trying to convince thousands, tens of thousands, even millions of potential customers to click on your promotion and buy whatever you are selling. Consider the following.

Can It Be Read?

Most designers love to play with typography: twisting, shaping and contorting letters and word to obey your every whim, forming a beautiful

masterpiece of skill and beauty. However, if your customer is not an artist, chances are they won't get what you're doing, and you've just lost a sale. Up front and to the point messaging is not always the answer either.

Consider using fun copy as an alternative. For example, if you sell banjos, instead of saying, "Shop New Banjo Supplies," you could say, "Add More Twang to Your Thang." As stated earlier with regard to designing for the customer, this depends a lot on what your target demographic is.

Can It Be Red?

No big surprise, red is the color of choice for error messages. But consider this when thinking about the user experience. What color does Target.com use for its error messages? Makes you think, right? Good! By the way, it uses red, too. The point is to consider alternatives. If your company has red in its brand, and the website has a lot of red as well, consider another color. You're trying to get the user's attention, so blue text with an alert icon could work just as well.

Consistency in Type: Stylistically and Creatively.

Making sure your headers, sub-headings and body copy are consistent across your website is easy. Making sure your website has a well-defined style guide is not. A style guide requires a lot of patience and care and is never complete. A website's style guide should be a living, breathing document that continues to grow as your company and brand grows.

There is nothing wrong with this. As you find certain styles that perform better than others, find a way to add them to the guide. This document, depending on the complexity of your brand and the size of your website, could potentially be split into two separate documents: a creative style

guide and a copy style guide. Each guide serves a different purpose but live together harmoniously.

Inspiration and Sources

Designing for the user experience in e-commerce is a multi-faceted puzzle. Some solutions work across the board, and some are specific to your website alone. The good news is that finding the solutions that best fit your particular needs is the most challenging and rewarding work a designer can do. It takes a rare breed to fully appreciate the value of the user experience, and if you are part of it, I hope this article and these resources give you as much pleasure as they have given me.

12 Tips for Designing an Excellent Checkout Process

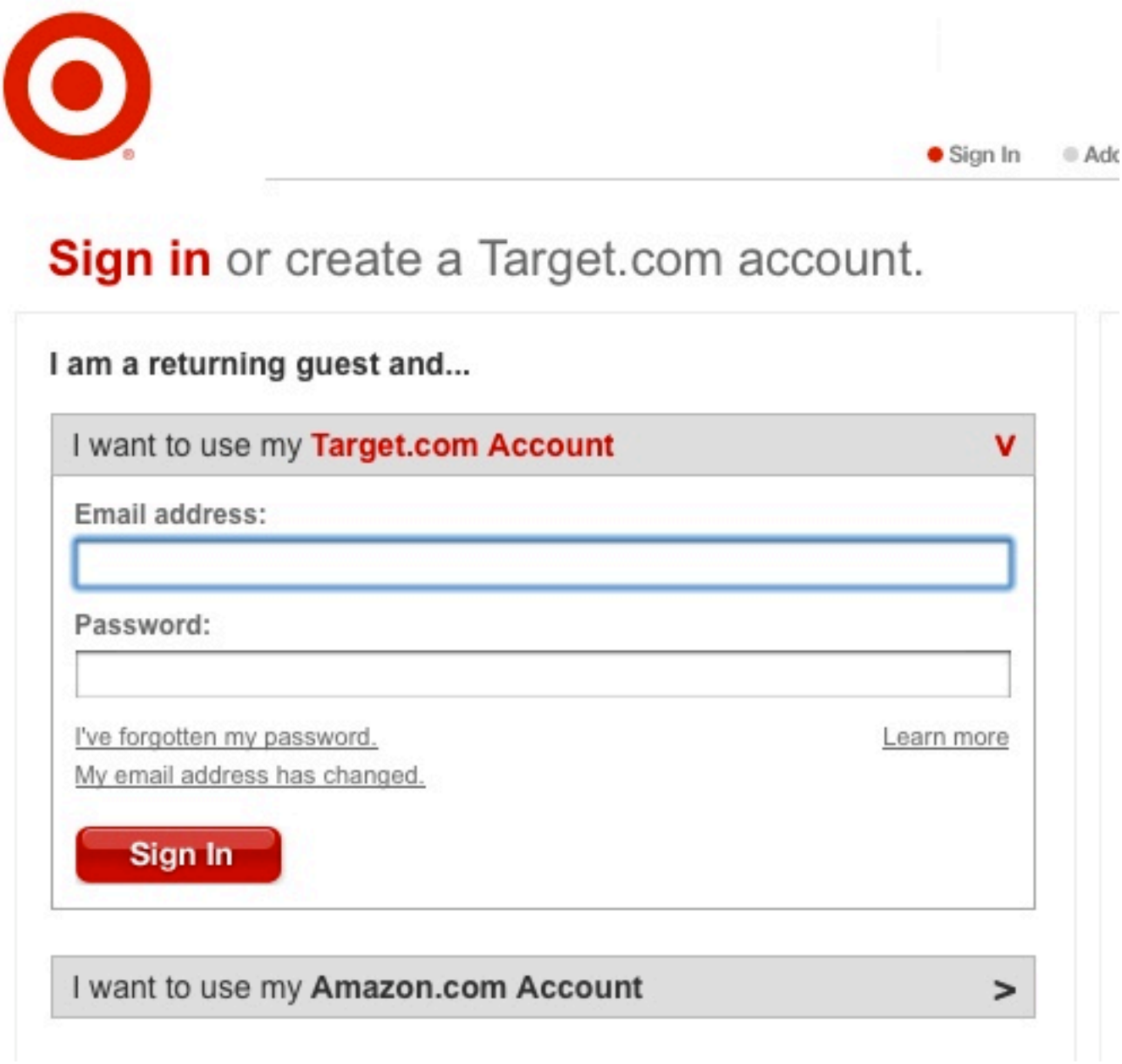
By Dmitry Fadeyev

Shopping online can be a great experience. You don't have to leave the comfort of your home and you can quickly compare and read about all the competing products in order to pick the best one for you. But it can also be a little frustrating if the process isn't designed correctly.

Looking around for that checkout link, having to fill out registration forms and then being told the product is out of stock isn't going to make your day. Spend a little bit of time fine tuning your checkout process and polishing off the user experience and you'll be rewarded with happier customers and more sales. Here are 12 useful tips to help you do just that.

1. Don't require registration to shop

Your customers are here to shop, not to fill out forms. Make sure that the registration is done during the checkout process and not before — and certainly not before a visitor places goods into their shopping basket. Sign-up forms are barriers because they take effort and time to fill in.

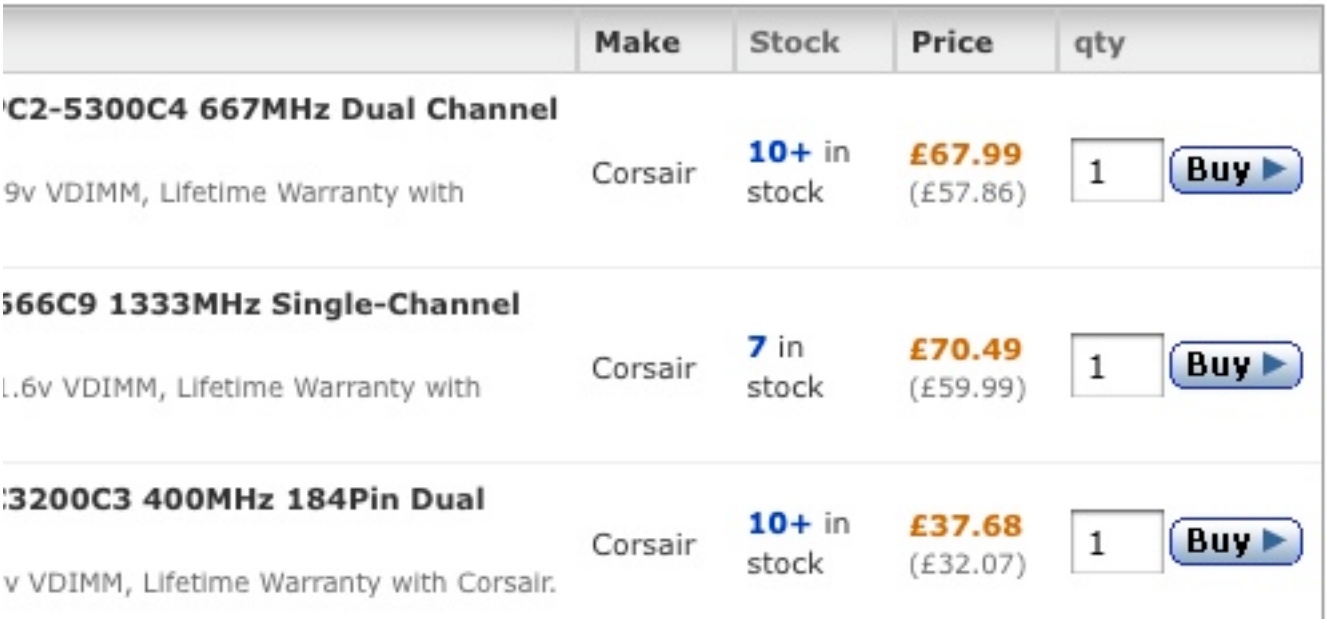

Sign In
Sign in or create a Target.com account.
I am a returning guest and...
I want to use my Target.com Account
Email address:
Password:
I've forgotten my password.
Learn more
My email address has changed.
Sign In
I want to use my Amazon.com Account

Target requires an account, but it's only prompted after you're ready to check out.

By moving these barriers further down the line you increase the chance of your visitors becoming paying customers. This is because they've already spent time shopping so they're less likely to stop now and waste that initial involvement. If that barrier is placed right at the beginning, however, they might just walk away. Think of it as holding the door to your store open for your customers to come in.

2. Inform customers if the item is available

Be clear about the availability of the items and inform your customers about the stock levels. If an item isn't available, don't take your potential customer through several steps just for them to discover that they can't actually buy it right away. Don't just display stock levels on product pages either, show them right on the search results page.

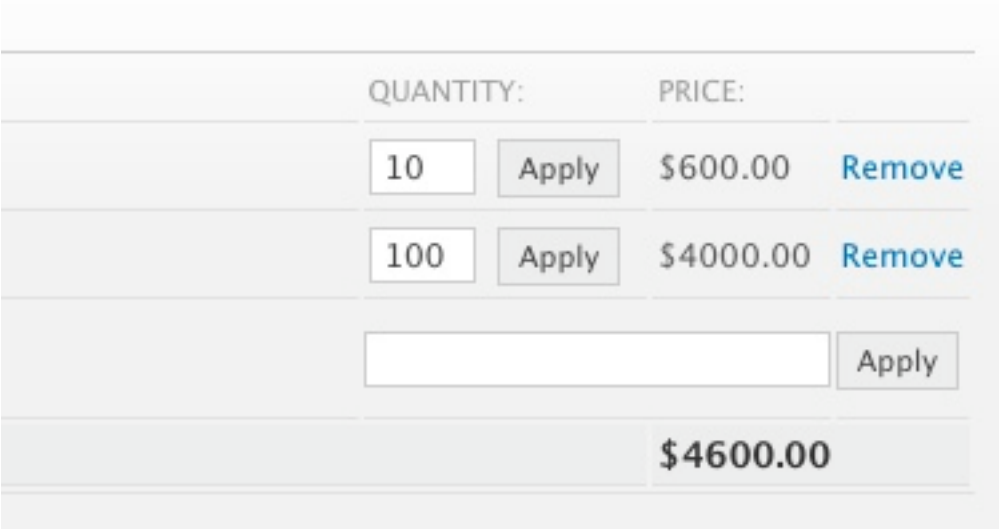


Overclockers provides detailed stock information right from the product listing pages.

Additionally, if an item is out of stock right but will be available at a later date, offer a pre-order option so those people who aren't worried about getting it right away can still make the purchase.

3. Allow your customers to easily modify the order

Everyone makes mistakes. People put the wrong goods into their shopping basket or change their mind. By making things easy to modify, you make sure you don't frustrate your potential customers during the checkout process by making things easy to modify.



IconDock makes sure to provide simple controls to change the quantity of an item or remove it.

If someone wants to remove an item or items from their cart, don't force them to enter the zero amount; instead, provide a "remove" link that will delete a product from the cart and ensure order modification is quick and easy.

4. Provide users with real-time-support

Since the checkout process requires user's input, it is very likely to assume that many users might experience problems – caused by any misunderstandings or some particular needs or interests that can not be easily defined using the available web-interface. In these situations it may

be crucial to provide users with professional, personal assistance instead of sending them to large help- or FAQ-pages that may not have the solution to user's problem. And, of course, if users don't get the help they need and have doubts about the whole thing, they are very likely to cancel the checkout process.

Therefore it's a good idea to add a chat- or telephone-assistance for the checkout process. Not every company can afford it, but middle and larger companies may want to consider this option, particularly if the checkout process is more involved.

5. Keep the 'Back' button fully functional

The back button is one of the most used buttons in a web browser, so you can be sure some people are going to employ it during the checkout process on your site. Some sites disable the functionality of the Back button through automatic redirects or error messages, which is sure to negatively effect the visitor's experience.

Not only should the back button lead to the previous page without encountering any errors, you should also save the user's data so that it is displayed again if it's a form. This allows people to make adjustments and carry on without having to re-fill the whole form. Yes, sometimes it's too late to go back, like after clicking that last 'Complete order' button, but by ensuring that all the other pages get along with the Back button you can deliver a better user experience to your customers by saving them time and frustration.

6. Provide photos, specifications and links for the items in the basket

Your customers will need to review their basket before clicking that final button that will complete their order to ensure they've actually got what they came here for. Item titles alone aren't the best method for helping your visitors to quickly scan over the basket, so make sure to add pictures and product specifications — e.g. size, color, hardback or paperback.

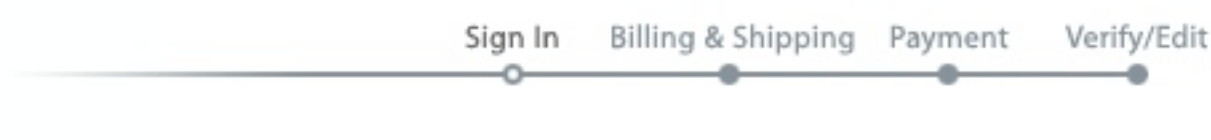
Shopping Cart Items--To Buy Now
Price:
Item added on November 24, 2010
Apple iPod nano 8 GB Graphite (6th Generation) NEWEST MODEL - Apple Computer
Condition: New
In Stock
$143.54
You Save: $5.46 (4%)
Save for later
Delete
Eligible for FREE Super Saver Shipping
See accessories for this item
This will be a Gift (Learn more)
Item added on November 24, 2010
Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability, 2nd Edition - Steve Krug; Paperback
Condition: New
In Stock
$26.40
You Save: $13.60 (34%)
Save for later
Delete
Eligible for FREE Super Saver Shipping

Amazon specifies colors and details, e.g. paperback/hardback, links back to the product but fails to provide thumbnail images.

Additionally, you should link these items to their product pages just in case the customer wants to verify that it is indeed the right item.

7. Provide a progress indicator

Checking out is usually a multi-step process. This means the customer will have to navigate several pages before the order is complete. To make this process usable be sure to add a progress indicator that says exactly at what stage of the checkout process the customer is right now and how long there is left to go — i.e. list all the steps.



Apple shows an elegant progress indicator on their checkout pages.

Knowing where you are in the topography of the site or process will give your users a sense of control, which is important from a usability perspective. Also, knowing what stages are yet to come will eliminate any confusion — i.e. they will know when they get to the last step. This will makes it easier to click through as you know you can still modify or cancel the order at any of the stages before that.

8. Keep the checkout interface simple

The checkout process is different to the rest of the browsing experience on your site. During this process your customers aren't shopping — they're making the purchase. This means all the browsing controls are redundant here and would only distract your customers from the task at hand.

Eliminate these unnecessary elements — e.g. product category links, top products, latest offers, and so on — to keep the interface simple.

Provide a "return to shopping" link in case the customer wants to go back and buy something else. Additionally, ensure all the buttons that point to the next step in the process are large and prominent so they're not missed.

9. Don't take the user out of the checkout process

It's essential that the checkout process isn't disrupted, for example, by taking the customer to a different page. Taking the user out of the process can cause two problems: 1) they might get confused about where they are and even lose the checkout page by closing the tab or window. 2) they may get distracted and fail to complete the process.

To remedy this, we really need to find a way to show all of the necessary information on the checkout pages themselves. If you need to provide some help or information that doesn't fit on the current page, use floating windows or, as a last resort, a pop-up window to display this. This allows you to present new material to the user without taking them out of the checkout process.

10. Inform the users about delivery times

Shopping online has one big disadvantage to shopping in your standard 'brick and mortar' store: you have to wait to get your stuff. To address this be sure to tell your customers when they can expect to receive their products.

The Apple Store adjusts shipping estimates with AJAX as you customize your order.

This is essential for a couple of reasons. Firstly, your customers may need to make sure there is somebody at home to receive the delivery; and secondly, you'll set an expectation so they won't need to keep guessing. Make sure these dates are shown as early as possible, preferably on the product pages themselves, so that your potential customers can judge whether or not they'll get the item fast enough for their needs.

11. Tell the customers what happens next

Okay, your customers have completed the order and clicked that last button — so what happens next? Finalize the order with a "Thank you" note. This is just being polite and your customers are sure to appreciate the kind words.

Also, make sure to tell your customers what will happen next — i.e. a message informing them that they'll receive a confirmation email when the goods are shipped. This will clear up any uncertainties about their order and set the right expectations.

12. Send out a confirmation email

Your customer may have checked out and placed their order, but the process isn't yet complete. Send out a confirmation email with the details of their order and a delivery estimate. The order details will be helpful as they'll allow your customers to verify that they've ordered the right things.

Your Order with Amazon.co.uk
Delete
Junk
Reply
Reply All
Forward
Print
To Do
From: auto-confirm@amazon.co.uk
Subject: Your Order with Amazon.co.uk
Date: 6 February 2008 17:02:18 GMT
To:
amazon.co.uk
Thanks for your order, Dmitry Fadeev
Want to manage your order online?
If you need to check the status of your order or make changes, please visit our page at Amazon.co.uk and click on Your Account at the top of any page.
Ordering Information:

Amazon sends you an email after you've checked out to confirm the details and also explain how you can modify it before it's shipped.

If there's a mistake, they should be able to log back in and modify their order before it has been shipped. Simple mistakes like choosing the wrong size or color will happen, so make the shopping experience easy and supportive for your customers.

Conclusion

Building a good checkout experience is about several things. It's about eliminating distractions to help the user focus at the task at hand. It's about providing all the necessary information and help so that the customer understands all the stages of the process. Most important, it's about making it easy, because after all, the quicker a customer can check out, the happier they will be and the quicker you'll close the sale.

How to Engage Customers in Your E-Commerce Website

By Rung András

One of the most influential factors in our buying decisions is the opinions of our friends and relatives. Likewise, a large majority of online shoppers now trust what other customers say about the products they buy more than the e-tailers themselves. The reason is that we trust people who are "on our side," even if we do not know them personally.

This attitude was described as the "Amazon effect" by Joshua Porter in his book *Designing for the Social Web*. He observed during his tests that people always started shopping on Amazon first. Their main reason was not that Amazon was better or that they had an Amazon account; they simply knew that on Amazon they could always find trustworthy information provided by people like them. They wanted to know the "truth," not an idealistic vision of the product decorated by marketing cliches.

Love the Kindle and support, November 22, 2010
By Sophwills - See all my reviews
Amazon Verified Purchase (What's this?)
This review is from: Kindle Wireless Reading Device, Wi-Fi, 6" Display - with New E Ink [Includes USB Cable for Charging. For International Shipment] (Accessory)
Absolutely love my Kindle. Showed it to my sister and she was straight on I one as well. Have had mine for 3 weeks now and haven't had to recharge it about two to three hours a day. Just love how I can shop for books and the to my kindle almost instantly.
Help other customers find the most helpful reviews
Was this review helpful to you? Yes No
Report abuse | Permalink
Comment

Amazon's verified purchase tag increases the trustworthiness of a review.

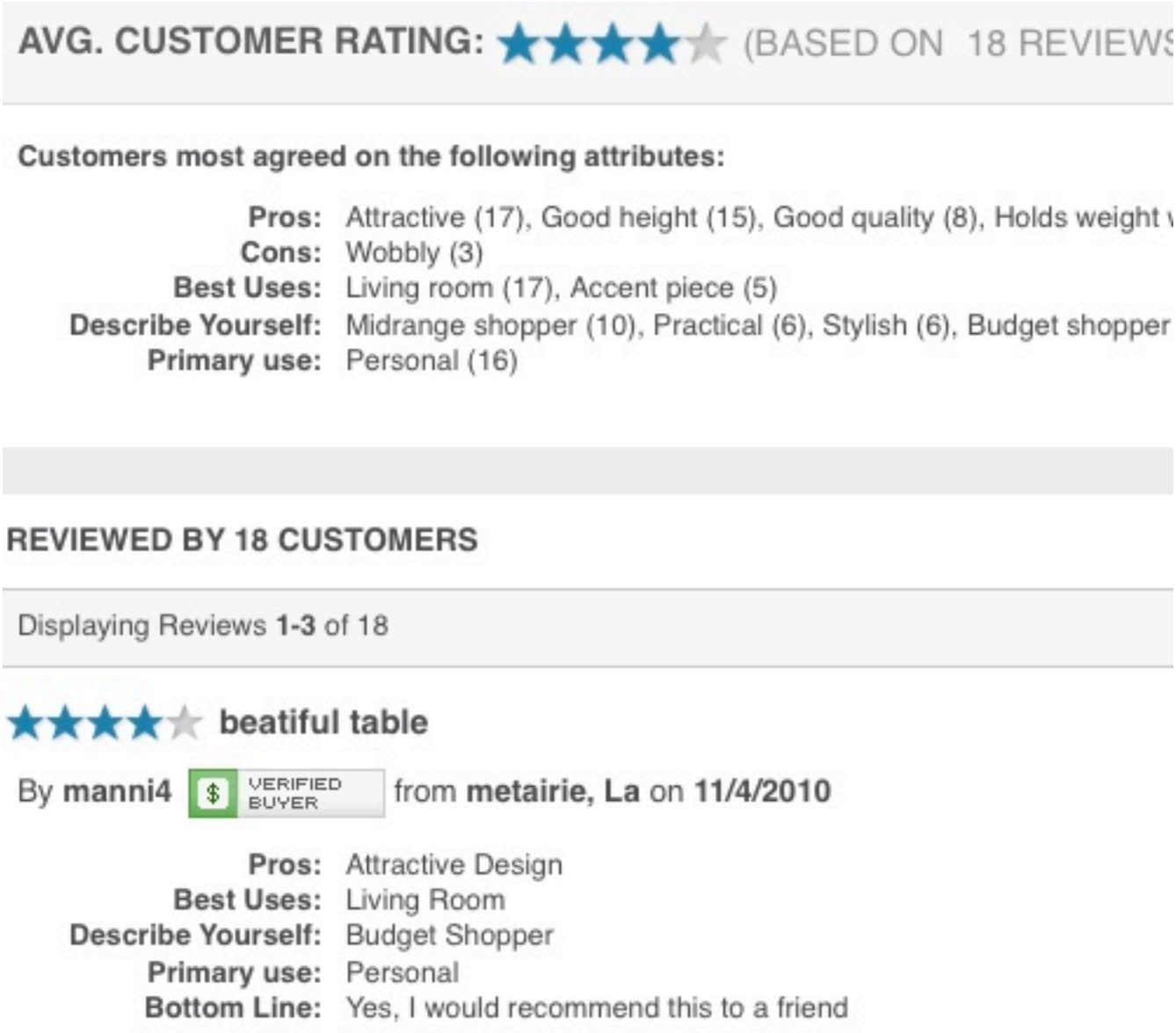
Positive And Negative Effects

User feedback like Amazon's could prove to be a valuable service for your customers and could trigger several positive effects. It doesn't really matter how much information you present about your product, it will still be biased by its nature. Reviews with personal stories and remarks from people who just had an experience with your product, though, can elicit trust in a way that a simple product info page could never do. Detailed information about the reviewer creates a personality (and obviously a realistic story about the product) with whom we can identify. Good stories are easier to understand and remember. They show us how a product works in the real world and with real usage. They also provide a sense of objectivity and authenticity to potential customers.

First of all, reviews and ratings generate conversions as in the case of Hayneedle (formerly Netshops), which increased its sales by 26% after displaying user feedback. This percentage could be even higher, according to PowerReviews. While the fear that negative feedback might harm sales is not entirely unfounded, do not be too concerned, because reviewers are twice as likely to write positive reviews than negative ones. Even if you lose some sales of your mediocre products, you'll win in the end because you will have sold many more of your superior ones.

Moreover, negative reviews are not all that bad. As John McAteer, Google's retail industry director, says, "No one trusts all positive reviews." In the absence of negative reviews, visitors will assume that all of your reviews are fake. No service or product is perfect. Potential customers want to know what could go wrong with it. But if they cannot sympathize with a negative reviewer, they may be inclined to purchase your product.

People sometimes want to read only negative reviews because they already have a positive impression of a product and want to know about disadvantages (intentionally or unintentionally) not mentioned by the provider. An unfair negative review could entice people to write positive reviews to mitigate the negative one and defend their favorite.


AVG. CUSTOMER RATING: (BASED ON 18 REVIEWS
Customers most agreed on the following attributes:
Pros: Attractive (17), Good height (15), Good quality (8), Holds weight
Cons: Wobbly (3)
Best Uses: Living room (17), Accent piece (5)
Describe Yourself: Midrange shopper (10), Practical (6), Stylish (6), Budget shopper
Primary use: Personal (16)
REVIEWED BY 18 CUSTOMERS
Displaying Reviews 1-3 of 18
beatiful table
By manni4 VERIFIED BUYER from metairie, La on 11/4/2010
Pros: Attractive Design
Best Uses: Living Room
Describe Yourself: Budget Shopper
Primary use: Personal
Bottom Line: Yes, I would recommend this to a friend

A review on Hammocks.com.

Getting quality feedback could help you cut back on the number of products returned, and you might want to think about eliminating products that have gotten low ratings and focus instead on popular ones. Customer contributions could keep product pages fresh, which is important to young shoppers, who seek out social content and customer ratings. Users tend to have less trust in outdated reviews. Perhaps a product has been improved

but is not reflected in the post. Or vice versa: perhaps a newer version of the product introduced some new bugs which haven't been discovered yet.

Content and good keywords could help your search engine optimization efforts as well. To allow Google to find everything in one place, present all comments and reviews on one single page — very much like Amazon does it. Also, keep in mind that in most cases people do not mind scrolling, whereas clicking and waiting for content to load can be irritating.

User-generated content has some further risks, too: for instance, competitors could invade your website to plant fake reviews. To avoid this, moderate the review section and invite users to report any concern they have with a review. Moderating reviews is a powerful tool, but you need to make sure that you use it responsibly. If you are not careful, you could develop the habit of deleting reviews that actually do serve your business. Moderate only those reviews that state untruthful things or that are abusive or do not contain any helpful information. Otherwise, simply adding your opinion to a comment is better.

Be transparent, open-minded and authentic: reply to the negative comment and explain why in your opinion it is wrong or what other features of the product or service could mitigate the negative experience the user had. In fact, if your comment is meaningful and helpful, you may be able to win loyal customers by providing them with alternative options that are perfectly tailored to their interests. If you have a substantial group of enthusiastic reviewers, the good reviews and positive effects will drown out the negative reviews.

In the following sections, we'll analyze how you can make it easy for users to give quality feedback and share it with other visitors. We'll focus on ratings, reviews, the interaction facilitated by them, as well as some aspects of sharing. Obviously, there are many other ways to involve users (and we

may get to them in one of the following articles), but mastering these will boost your business.

These recommendations mainly concern usability. Obviously, they alone won't get people to immediately start writing many reviews and rate your products. Use offline and online marketing techniques to get all cylinders firing, and then build on whatever momentum you generate. Contact buyers after a sale to get their input. Use coupons, incentives, contests, prizes and email campaigns to motivate them. Implementing these techniques is a must if your target audience is not already passionate about your product.

Ratings

Collecting ratings is a quick and dirty way to collect valuable product information from users. Ratings can be given in a second, and so they do not interrupt the user's main activity and (usually) do not require them to log in. While ratings are a simple tool, make sure they are simple and straightforward: even tiny deviations from conventions can affect their usefulness.

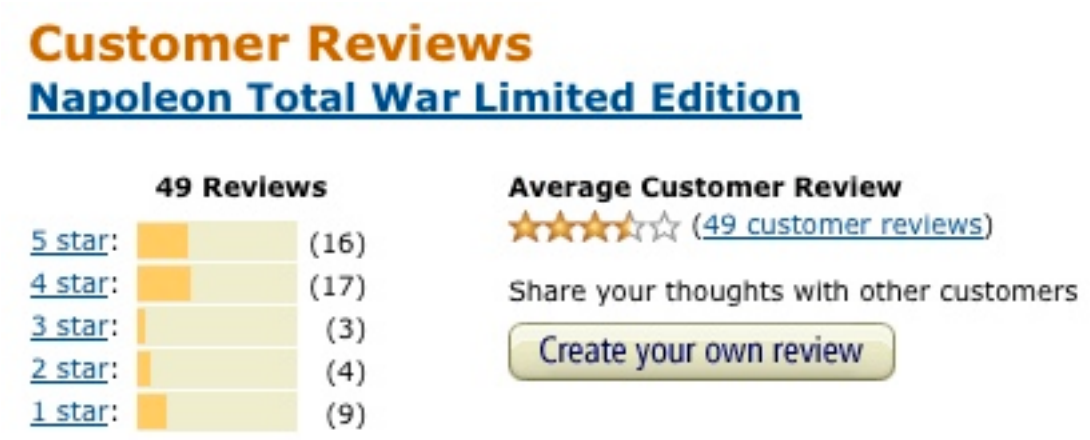
For maximum effectiveness, it seems reasonable to use simple metaphors such as stars for ratings (1 — 5) and thumbs up / thumbs down for voting (vote up, vote down). A website with loyal or tech-savvy users might try to add value or humor by using symbols other than stars or hands, but sometimes it's just not worth getting creative. A particularly educated or expert audience might appreciate 10 stars. It is probably not a good idea to use an unusual number of stars, like seven, which will rather confuse most people.

Enable people to rate with one click, and light up empty stars (or whatever your symbol is) on mouse-over to suggest that the area is clickable. Even if the function of ratings is quite obvious, help out visitors with description of each level, like “Perfect,” “Good” and “Miserable.”

Ask users to rate using a very direct, precise language: nothing can beat the good old “rate the product” wording which is as clear as it can get. Communicate clearly what users are being asked to rate: depending on the current context, it may be not clear if you are asking to rate a brand, a product or customer service. And make sure that rating labels are unambiguous for novice users, too. Even if users understand the rating system, they may not know whether the ratings have been given by customers, the website owner, the manufacturer or independent experts.

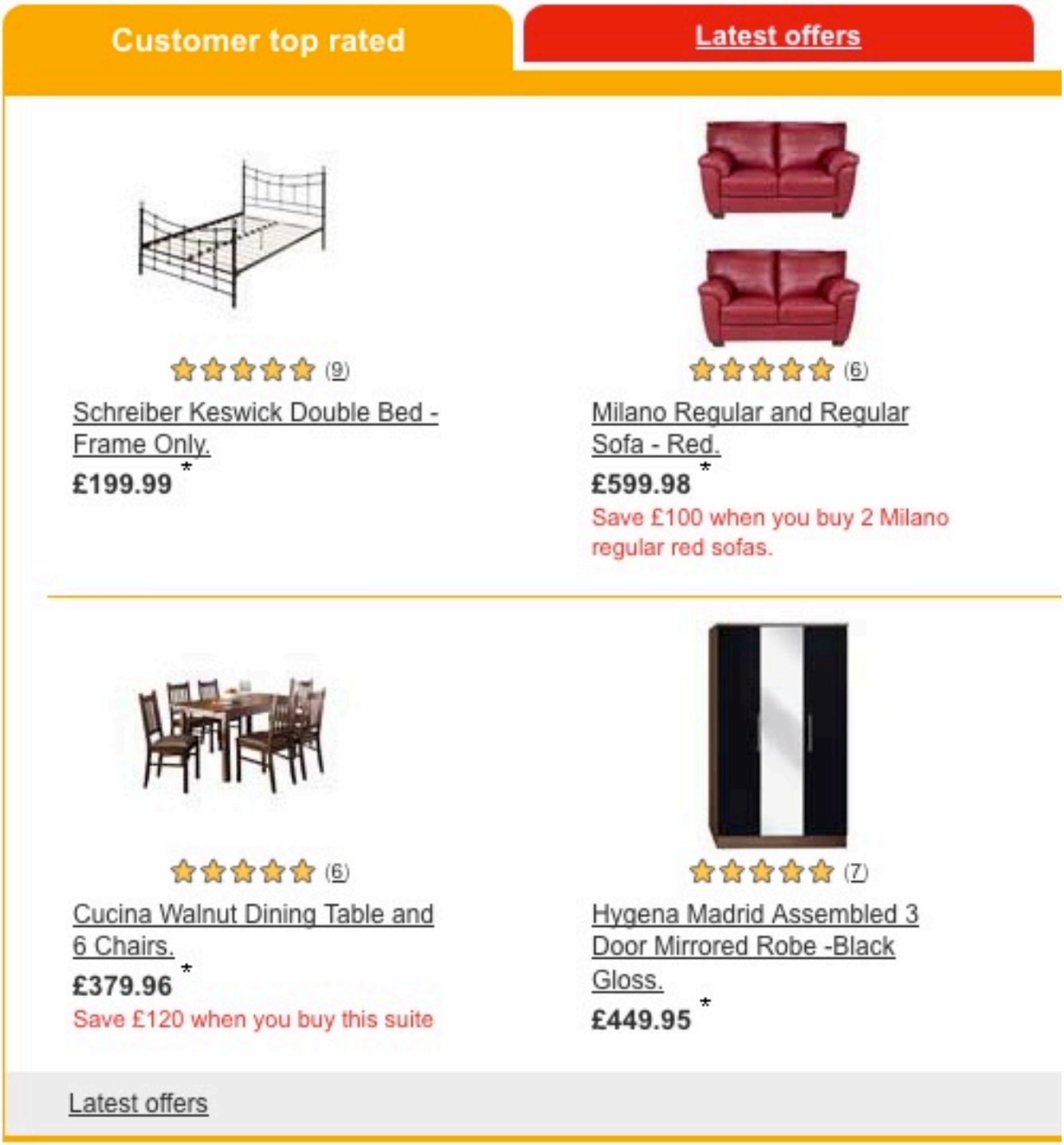
When users have clicked on a rating, clearly show the results, for instance using a different color, which clarifies that their vote has been accounted for and prevents them from voting again.

Indicate the number of votes each rating has received, because one five-star rating from an enthusiastic user isn’t comparable with a hundred five-star ratings from different customers. The relevance of the voting depends on the number of votes given to the product. It may be a good idea to show every rating tally in a small table, as iTunes does, because slight variations could reinforce the belief among users that the opinions of customers are balanced.



Amazon displays detailed ratings right in the listing.

Always show ratings in sections where you actually display the main description of the product, and allow users to order and filter by rating on the search result pages. Position the ratings beside or close to the product name to enable quick scanning. The information is key, so let users find it easily.



Ratings appear near product names on [Argos](). The "Customer top rated" tab is an easy way to see what's popular.

Getting Reviews

It is crucial to make the process of adding review as easy as possible. Users will not be very motivated to contribute anything at the beginning, so allow them to write a review simply by hitting a 'write a review'-button located close to the ratings at the top of the page. If your product has variations or versions, indicate which one they're reviewing.

You could ask customers to write reviews by e-mailing them, but be careful with timing. Customers may need time to form an opinion about your product. With an electronic device, they may know whether they like it within days. With a book, they may need weeks or months. In the latter case, asking for a review after a week could only annoy the buyer who will be very likely to block or ignore your e-mails in the future.

While the quality of reviews is crucial, you might want to invite users to choose from a predefined list of pros and cons, allowing them to suggest additional ones, which become visible after you moderate them. Letting users set their profile — such as by indicating whether they are a "heavy user," "occasional user," etc. — and explaining how to use a product best could give customers some useful hints. Your reviewers will probably not be professional writers; give them hints and tips on how to write a good review, even showing examples if possible.

Users should be able to preview their own review before submitting it. Let the users correct mistakes and information that they provided. What sounded harsh in the beginning, may have turned out to be a minor issue in the end, compared with all advantages a certain product has given the customer in the end. Also, don't forget to mention how and when the review will be processed and published. Will it be moderated or will it appear right away? Provide users with a genuine estimate, not vague terms.

How To Display Reviews

Being optimistic, you are probably prepared to receive dozens of reviews on your page, so making them easily scannable is crucial. Ratings can be displayed in a number of ways: apart from an overall overview of ratings, featuring an average score, the number of votes and their distribution, you also need to clearly display single ratings and reviews. The latter should display not only a review itself, but also maybe a summary or an excerpt, date of the review and as much information about the reviewer as possible.

The truth is that potential customers need to be able to connect with the person who provided the review; an anonymous review may be helpful but it is not trustworthy. Once we connect a review of the person with his personal activities, his work or his professional information, the information suddenly seems much more reliable and trustworthy.

Display the author's name as a link and the most important information about them, such as location, rank and type of user. By clicking on the link and scanning their other reviews, users can evaluate the reviewer's trustworthiness. You might also want to reward active reviewers. Give them a separate sub-page where they can introduce themselves and show all of their reviews at once. You could also display a list of top reviewers in the sidebar. Providing bonuses or discounts for most active users is a bit tricky as it may influence their objectivity in the reviews and have biased reviews as a result. And people are damn good at detecting bias and losing confidence in a company.

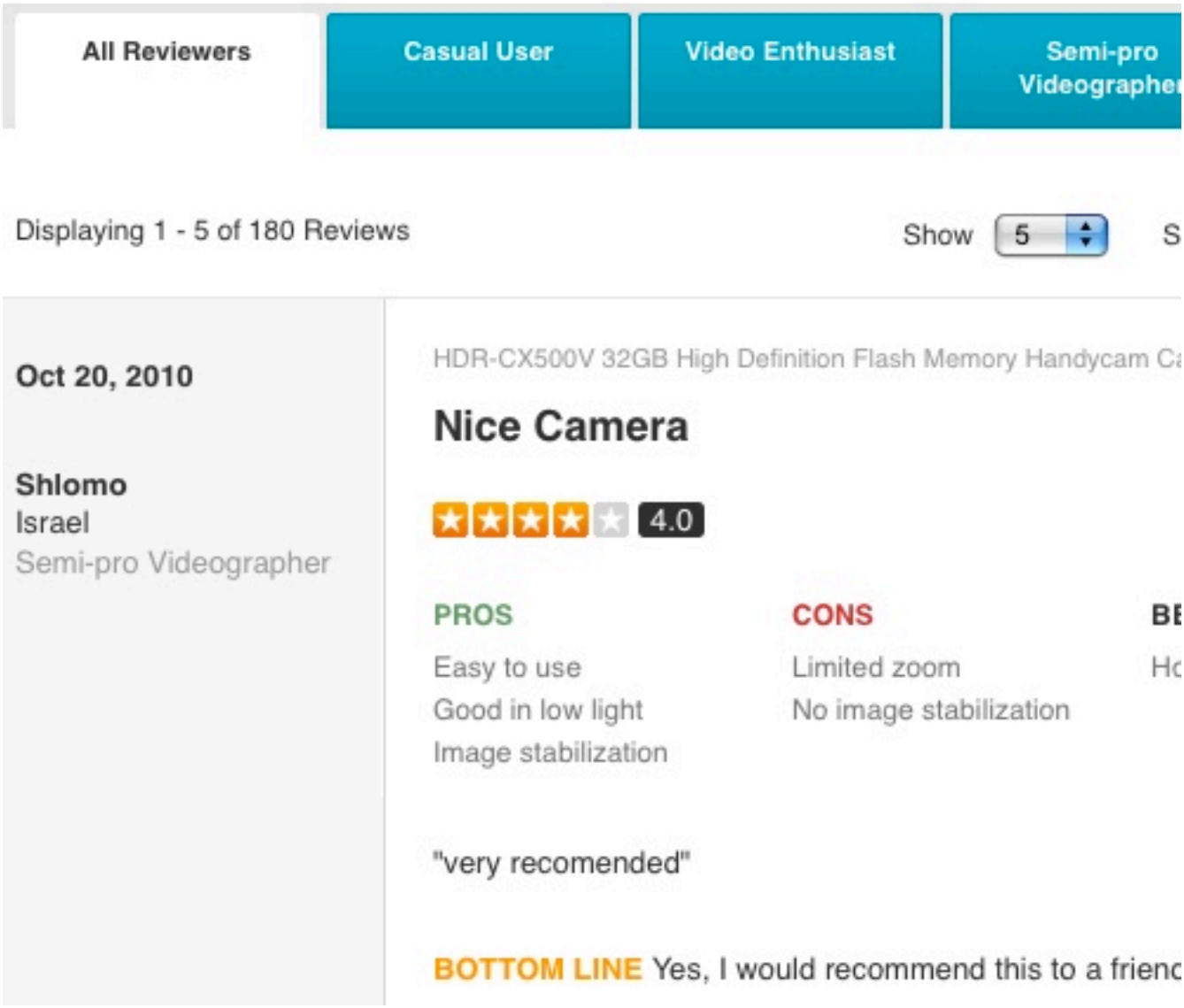
It is important to communicate to the customer the opinion of other customers about a review. If many users find the review useful, reply to it or sympathize with it in any possible way, the user will gain trust about the authenticity and objectiveness of the review and of the reviewer. Display

how many people found the review useful and also how many didn't find it useful. You can even sort your review by their "usefulness ratio". Offer users a possibility to reply, report a concern or answer the "was this useful?" question at the bottom of the review.

101 Reviews
5 star: (74)
4 star: (13)
3 star: (4)
2 star: (2)
1 star: (8)
Average Customer Review
(101 customer reviews)
Share your thoughts with other customers
Create your own review
See most helpful viewpoints
Showing 3-star reviews
See all reviews
7 of 7 people found the following review helpful:
Good and Bad, November 23, 2002
By A Customer
This review is from: Hot Rocks 1964-1971 (Audio CD)
Disc 2 is everything I could hope for, Jumpin' Jack Flash and Honky Tonk W
earlier songs? Satisfaction has all of this extra echo that didn't exist before
at 3 seconds is all but obliterated. That's not remastering - that's fraud! Ru
around. Buy this set for Disc 2 and don't throw out your old vinyl or CD's.
Help other customers find the most helpful reviews
Was this review helpful to you? Yes No
Report abuse | Permalink
Comment

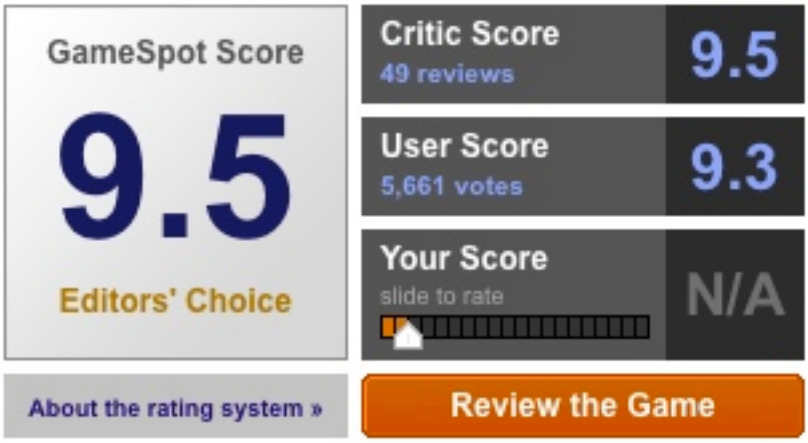
Amazon has tiny buttons to gain feedback about the reviews.

Being able to sort and filter reviews enables the quick scan of reviews. The most obvious options to offer for sorting are helpfulness and rating. But there are many more options, like the type of user and date, such as in the case of Buzzillions.



Buzzillions offers several ways to sort and filter. Key information — such as pros, cons, best uses and bottom line — catch the eye.

Rotten Tomatoes uses percentage points to measure quality.



A complex but well-designed rating interface on Gamespot

Interaction Generated By Reviews

Reciprocity is a most important concept related to social interaction. People who read reviews are often tempted to react to them. They may think that getting this valuable information for free obliges them to give something back to the community. Whether a review or feedback to the reviewer, and whether small or big, it does not matter. Enabling feedback on reviews could minimize the effect of rants or unfair reviews that people feel the need to rate down or comment on.

Voting on reviews could enhance the quality and trustworthiness of reviews. You could present reviews that are ranked highest for usefulness at the top. Voting provides feedback to reviewers and encourages reviewers to engage in healthy competition for reputation and the attention of visitors. The tool is most frequently used by people who are not customers as a way to express their opinion. Allowing them to vote encourages them to get involved.

Commenting on reviews brings real interaction and adds genuine value to the reviews in most cases. People can use them to give quality feedback to reviewers, correct mistakes, recommend other products, link to useful pages or write full reviews about related products. Rather than delete negative reviews, you could use comments as an honest way to respond to criticism of your products.

Comment threads for reviews can be transformed into real conversations that explore the pros and cons of the product in a much more interesting and natural way. Use indentation to display replies, or show them in a simple sequence with a “Respond to this” link.

Conclusion

Making it easy for users to keep your product pages alive is a crucial aspect of an e-commerce website. Your environment should be inviting enough to involve your loyal customers as well as unhappy customers to submit their reviews. Negative reviews can be as useful as positive ones, or even more helpful. In particular, if you respond to reviews, addressing issues and suggesting solutions, you can easily turn a negative comment in a positive one. And if your loyal customers support you, you gain an opportunity to elicit trust from customers who would probably dismiss your product page with perfect 5-star reviews. Once you have started with reviews, you could

create a question and answer section, a tagging system, video reviews, marks for favorite content, product discussion forums and so on.

When you implement ratings and reviews, focusing on communication is critical. A visually adequate presentation is crucial to digesting this information. Apply patterns that best match the user's mental process of digesting this information.

Ratings can stand on their own but could also be combined with reviews. Empty review sections and complicated forms will be significant barriers to success. Involve yourself in the communication threads and answer questions. Use social networking at the beginning, but support it with the authentic, genuine communication methods. When your system works as planned, focus on the reviewers; make your website a pleasant and encouraging place where users feel free to express their opinions.

Principles of Effective Search in E-Commerce Design

By Rung András

While product findability is a key factor of success in e-commerce, it is predominantly enabled by simple search alone. And while simple search usually doesn't fulfill complex needs among users, website developers and owners still regard advanced search as just another boring to-do item during development. Owners won't go so far as to leave it out, because every e-commerce website has some kind of advanced search functionality, but they probably do not believe it brings in much revenue.

On the contrary, well-devised advanced search offers several benefits and can be more than just a clumsy, complicated tool. First of all, effective search can accelerate the sales process. And faster sales can increase conversions, because you will not be losing customers who give up trying to find products. Furthermore, fast, precise and successful searches increase your customers' trust.

In this article, we will review how to build an interface that offers users the power of advanced search while preserving the clarity of simple search.

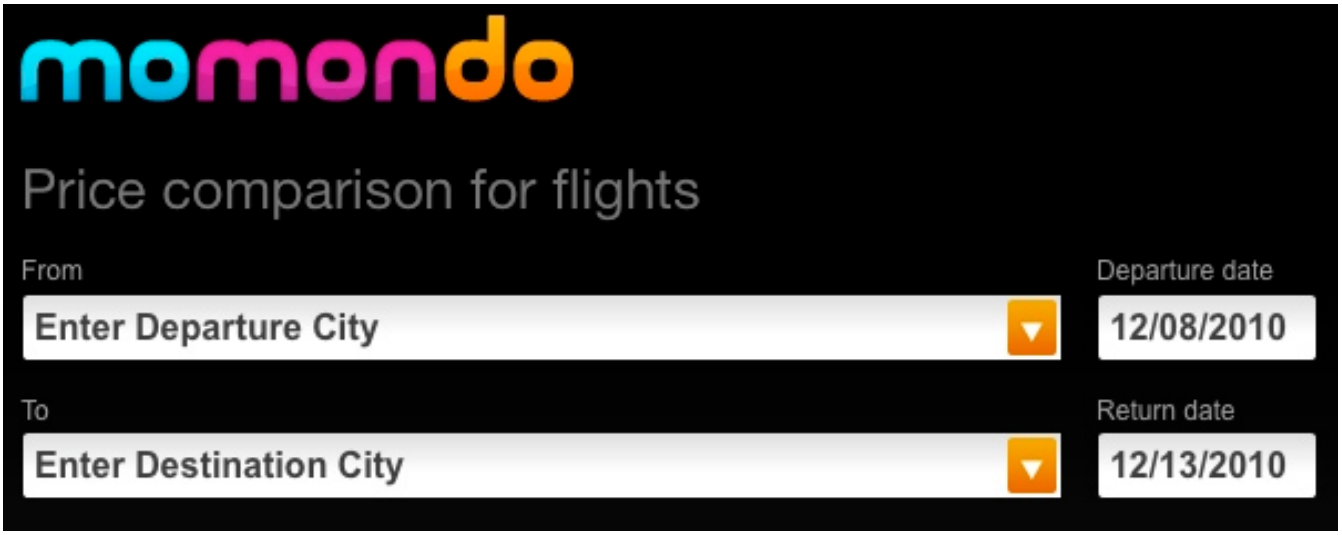
Dismantling Barriers

Although almost every e-commerce website has advanced search, visitors do not use it. First of all, people only use tools that they see. Advanced search is usually hard to detect. The link is usually too small and ugly, and so the flashy simple search button nearby overwhelms it. So even if the user was inclined to perform an advanced search, they have no motivation to do it.

The word itself is scary: “advanced.” It suggests we are about to encounter something complicated. And very often, we do. But even if we notice the advanced search link and are not intimidated by it, we don’t use it because we don’t see the benefit. The few who do use it see that once they perform the search, all “advanced-ness” is lost. So, to help our users exploit the power of advanced search, we have to fix usability problems, implement new approaches and improve our search terminology.

Approaches

There are several ways to enhance search. The classic approach for advanced search is parameter search. The user sets parameters using text boxes, operators and drop-down menus. When usability gurus tell you not to use advanced search, they are generally referring to this type. It usually has a complicated interface but can be very simple and effective if only the most important fields are shown and you stick to the basic guidelines of form design.



Momondo elegantly and effectively sticks to the most important input fields, making parameter search user-friendly.

Trulia's parameter search is a bit more complicated but thoughtfully supported by input hints and prompts. Even more options are hidden under the "More search options" link for advanced users.

A good way to avoid intimidating people is to disguise the complexity of the parameter search. Show only snippets of the interface by using the responsive disclosure/responsive enabling pattern. When the user sets a parameter, they move along, and then the next filter is shown. This solution can be useful for guiding novice users, but it can bore and irritate advanced users.

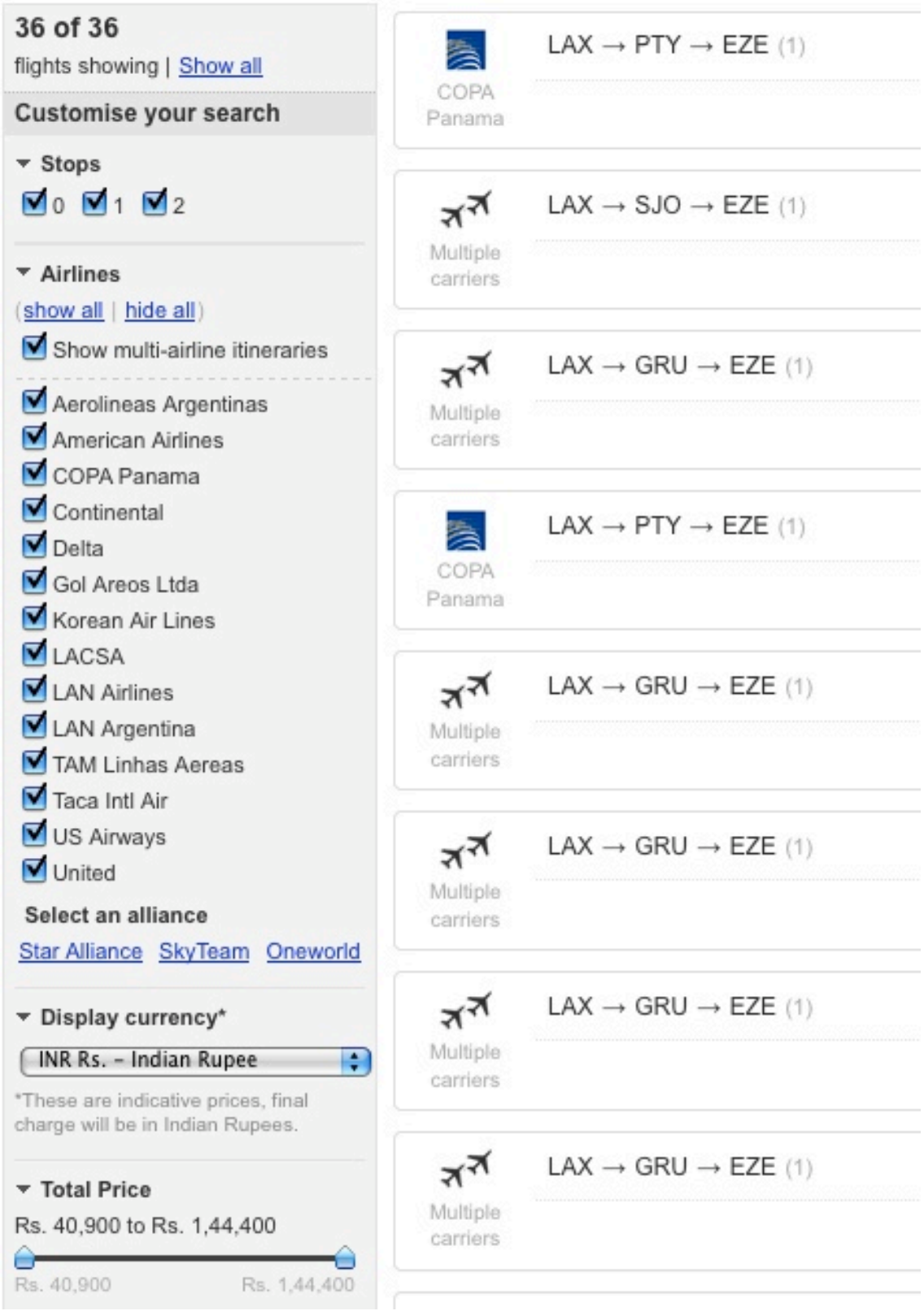
Compare CD rates
Need help?
Compare the highest bank CD rates (Certificate of Deposit) on the market and get your estimated earnings using the sliders on the right.
1. How much money do you have?
$26,000
Optional filters
Compare your bank APY
Yes No
2. How long will the CD last?
Include Internet banks
Yes No
4 Years 2 Months
3. Select CD type
Choose your state
New York
Regular CD

On MyBankTracker, users have to select "Yes" for the "Compare your bank APY" option for the "What is your current APY?" question to be displayed.

Faceted search is becoming the de facto standard for e-commerce website. The user performs a simple search first, but then on the results page, they can narrow the search through a drill-down link (for a single choice) or a checkbox selection (for multiple non-overlapping choices).

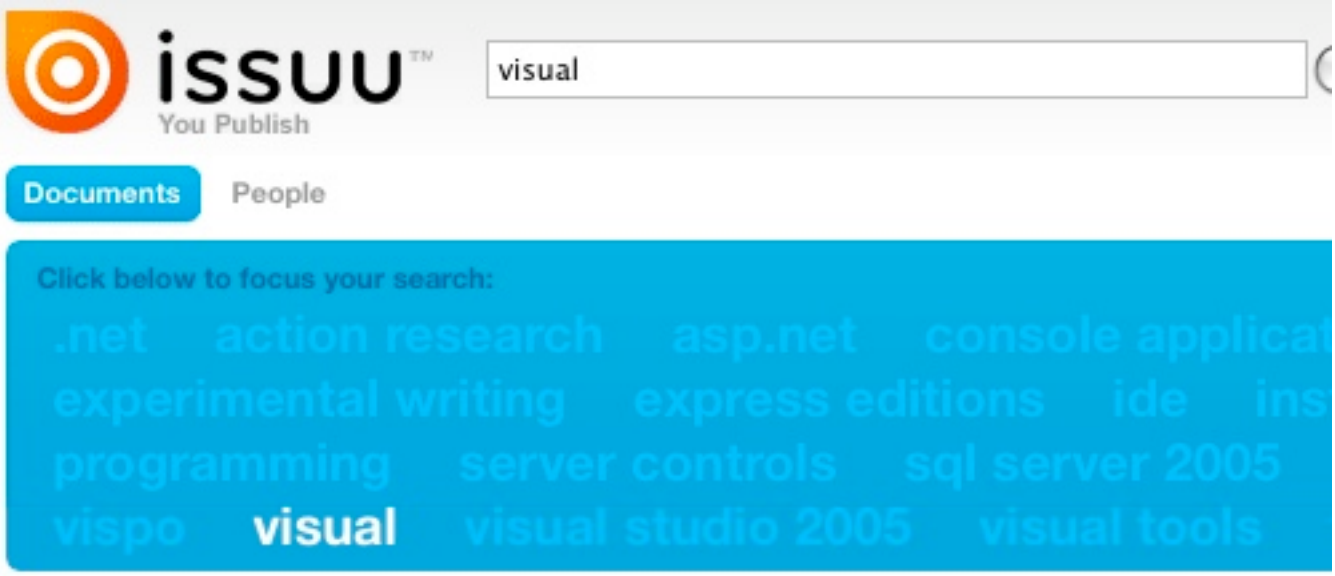
This can be faster than the progressive disclosure/enabling pattern and easier to use than plain advanced search. *Amazon* takes a similar but slightly modified approach: when a user begins a search, they can set some narrowing filters like “Only books” at the very start.

Filtering on Amazon



Travelers begin with a parameter search on Cleartrip but then find the best deal with faceted search.

Website maintainers may choose to tag products, or even let users tag them themselves. Tagging gives a website an overlapping taxonomy so that users have different ways to reach products.



After a user performs a keyword search, Issuu shows related tags to help the user narrow down the results. Note that the tags that are semantically closer to the search term have brighter colors.

Building Better Search

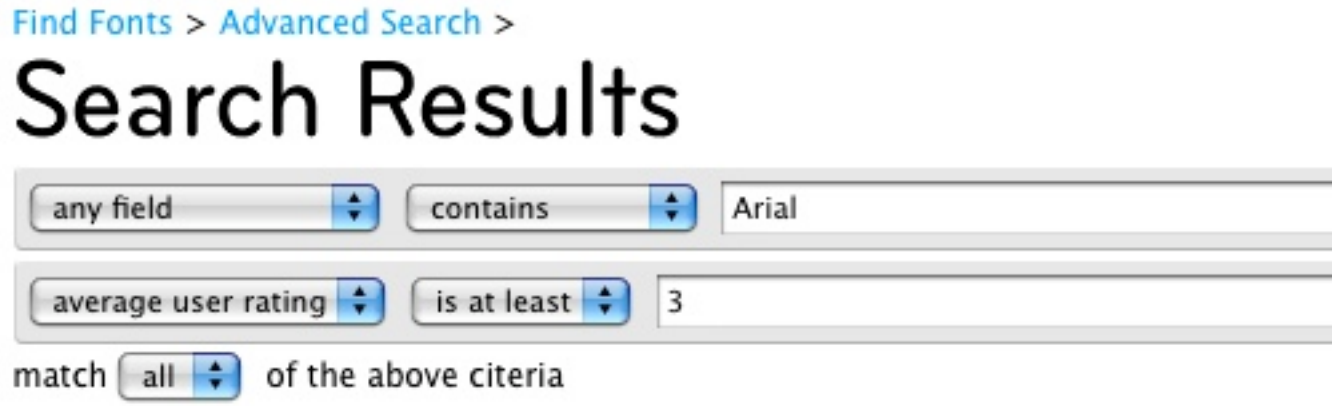
Faceted search is the easiest and now safest method by which developers can offer users advanced search functionality. But how to implement it?

Before undertaking something as time-consuming as that, make sure your website conforms to basic search usability principles. Is the search box in the right place? Does it work as expected?

The structure of the search results page must also be crystal clear. The results must be ranked in a logical order (i.e. for the user, not for you) by relevance. Users should be able to scan and comprehend the results easily.

Queries should be easy to refine and resubmit, and the search results page should show the query itself.

Consider basic user needs and behavior when planning search. You could frame it as adopting an "incremental construction" pattern. Let users create their own search, step by step. People may not comprehend the whole system at once, but if you guide them gently, searching will be made easier. Make their exploration of search functionality safe: users should be reassured that they can undo any option and not lose their results or settings.



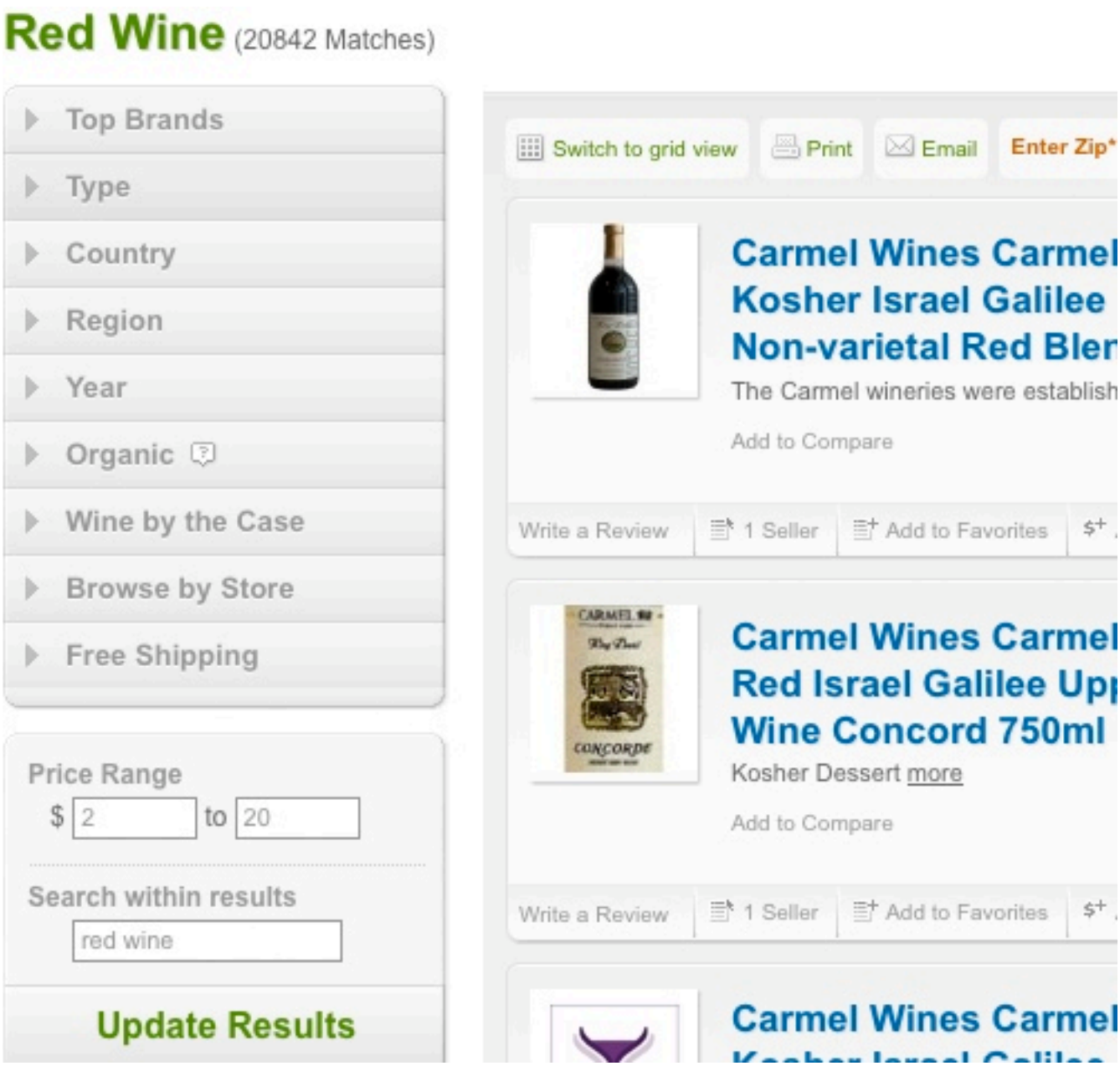
MyFonts allows users to control the complexity of their queries by using the - and + buttons to add and remove filters.

Your imagination may be a good start in defining which features deserve facets, but it is far from enough. Examine the traffic from your website and the search terms that users have typed into the simple search interface. Analyzing search query logs helps you handle spelling issues more effectively. Based on your analysis, you can also refine your auto-suggest system. What words, categories or taxonomy would describe these searches best? Use the most popular words in your search logs to label your facets and options.

Don’t forget to check your competitors’ categories either. Perhaps you would sort your products differently, but you may get good ideas from them. When you have sorted out your facets, test them with real users. Don’t just test the interface during the final phase; let users play with earlier versions as well.

Categorizing Products

Let users choose from among only the features that might influence their purchase. Omit features that are not important to users, even if you think they are. Features rarely chosen by customers should be put at the end of the list or hidden under a “More options” link.



*PriceGrabber allows users to control the complexity of their queries by using the **-** and **+** buttons to add and remove filters.*

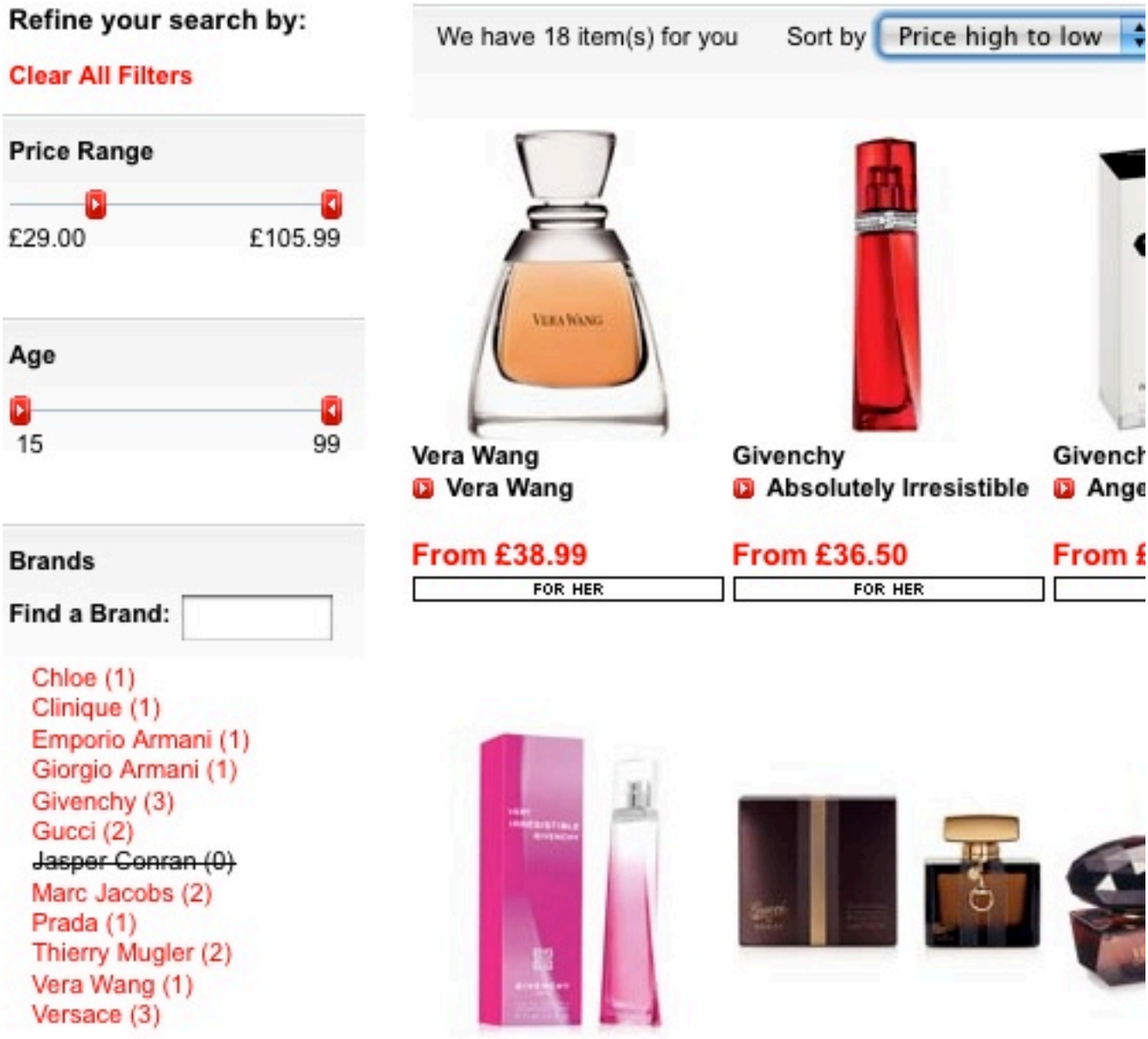
For your facets to work perfectly, you need a good taxonomy (categories). If users don't understand your system, you lose. Don't make users have to guess your system. Figure out their mental model of your product range first. The categories in your taxonomy should cover all products without overlap. For example, if a user can filter by color, do not omit colorless items in the results, or items for which color is irrelevant. Avoid vague words like "Other" and "More." The category hierarchy should be shallow, so that users do not have to drill too deep to find a product.

Architecture of Search

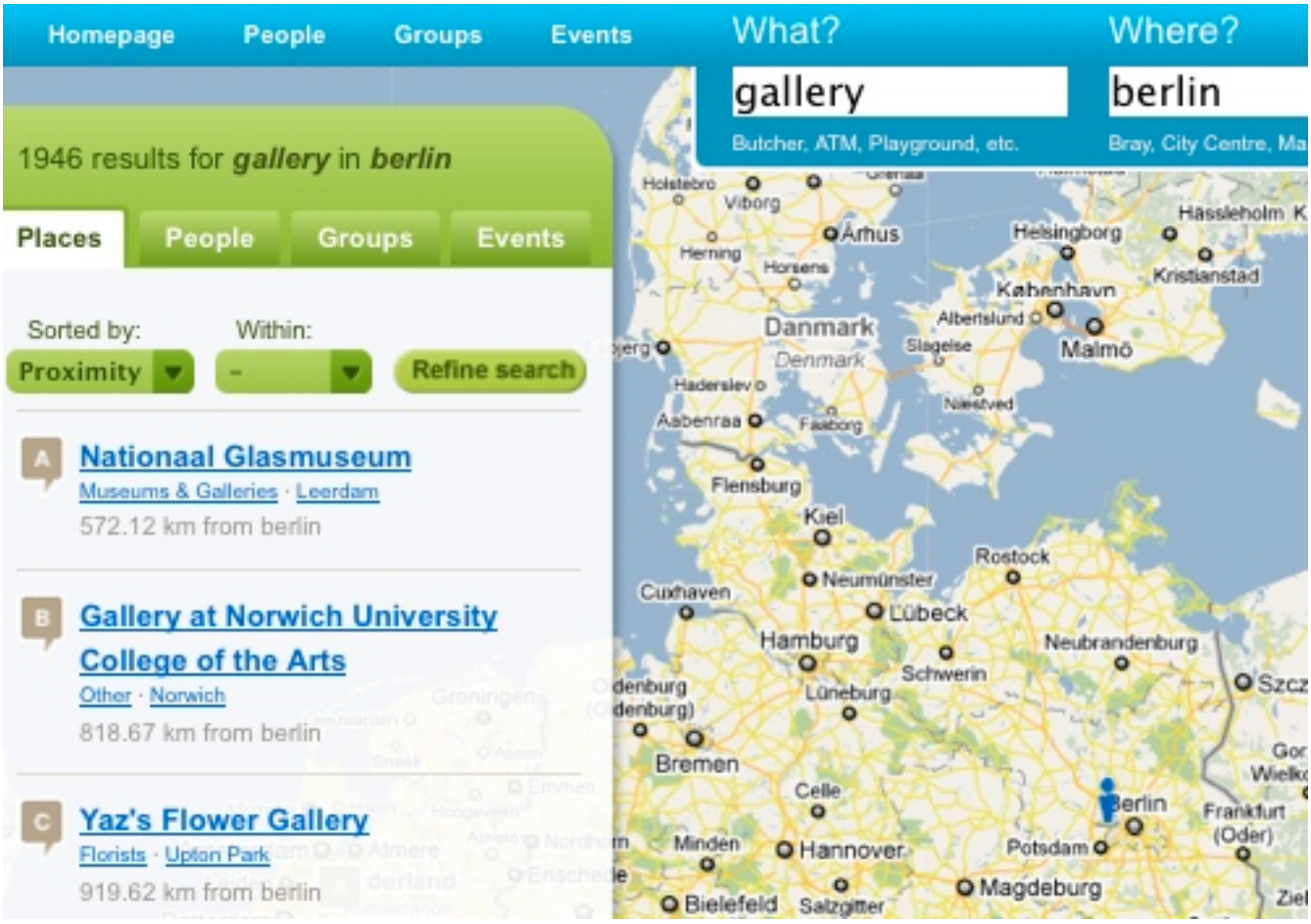
Although faceted search is much easier to use than the classic advanced search, it can become complex if too many facets are shown. Based on George A. Miller's research, humans can deal adequately with 7 items, plus or minus 2. This short-term memory constraint also informs the popular recommendation of the number of items to include in a navigation menu. Don't have more than 10 facets. Any more will confuse users, and the results will be about as helpful as the Dewey Decimal system.

Hide extra facets under a "More filters" link, even if you think they're all important. Everything cannot be equally important. If you think certain facets will be important for one user group and other facets important for another, then create a drag-and-drop interface, and allow users to close facets. Letting them save results or facet settings is useful, too, but make sure unregistered users can do it as well.

Order facets by importance. Most users will use only a few. Display only filter values that apply to the inventory you have available. If a facet has more than seven or eight options, put the extra options under a "More options" link or a different panel.

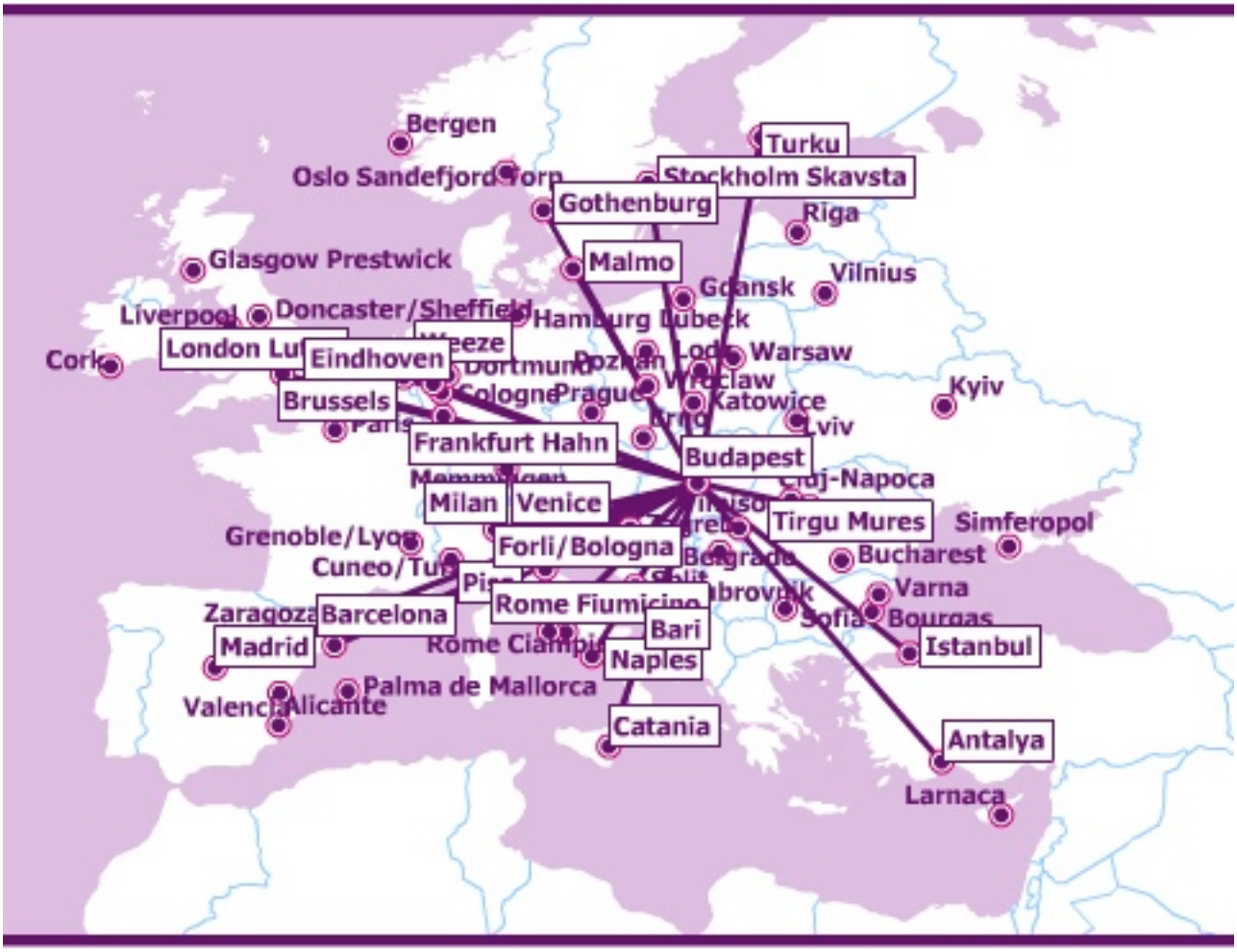


The Perfume Shop gives priority to age and price. Note that it also indicates what is available in a given price range.



Rate My Area offers an unconventional combo input box to begin a search, but its role is communicated clearly. After performing a search, the user can access various facets in different panels.

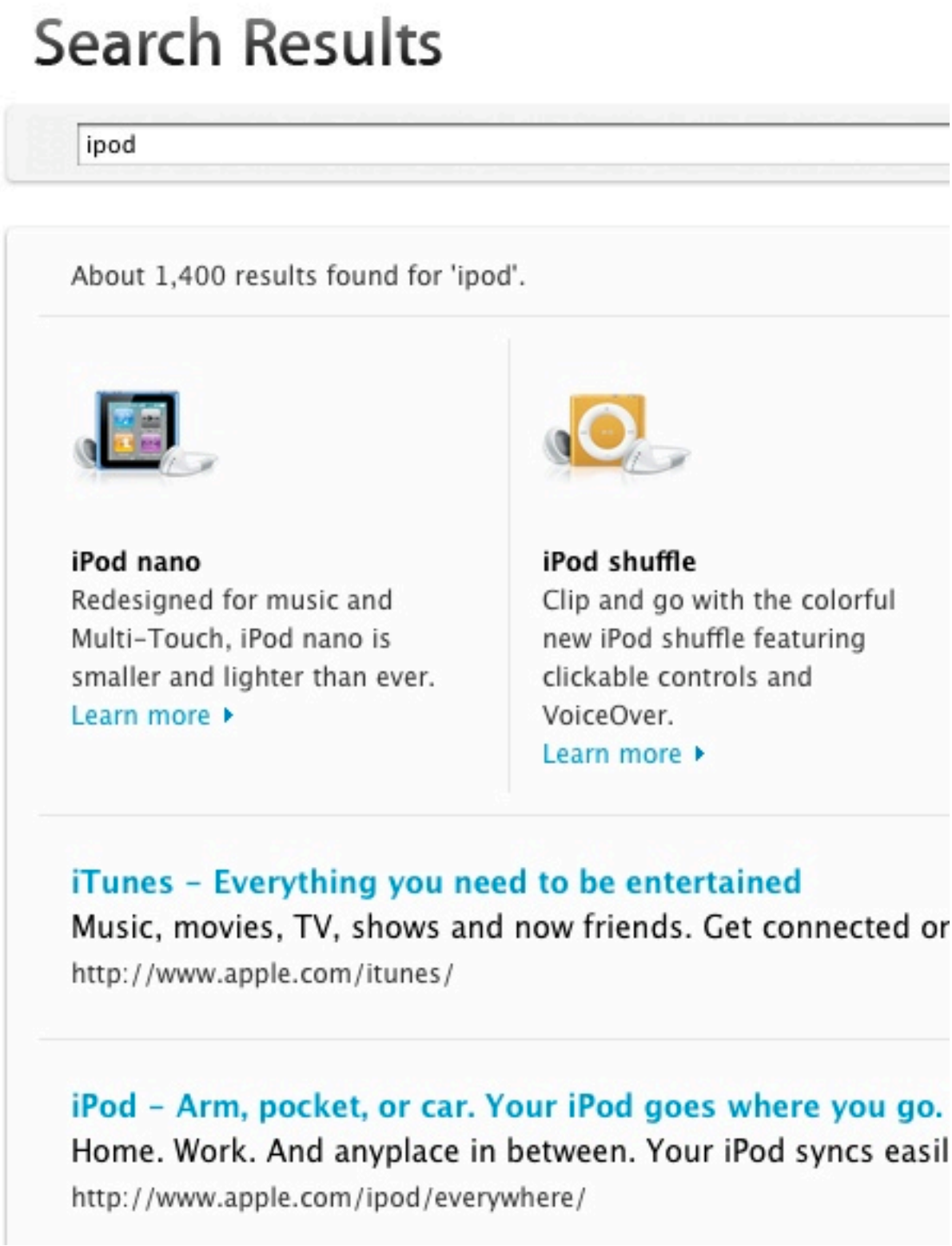
Faceted search is still keyword-driven. If products would be easier to find by referring to categories or if users will have problems identifying their needs, then use filtered search or a well-designed parameter search. Faceted search is cool but not a cure-all.



You do not have to type in your flight destination at Wizz Air. Simply select it from a map.

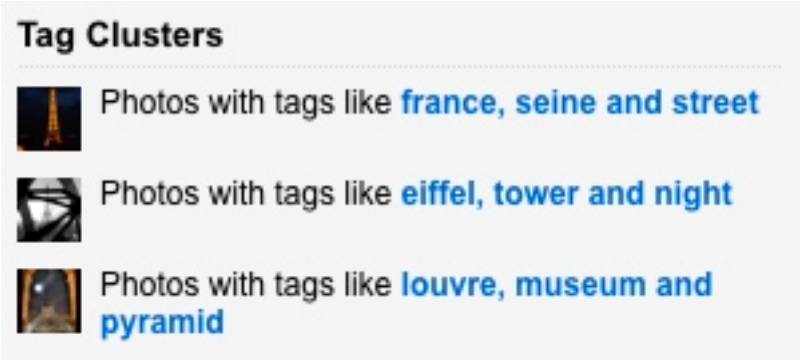
Enhancing Search

Whatever method you choose, you have several means of enhancing search. Do not automatically order the results page of the most frequent queries. Prioritize what you think best matches the search (i.e. the best bets). Add popular queries to the ones you've verified, and review the most popular results from time to time.


Search Results
ipod
About 1,400 results found for 'ipod'.
iPod nano
Redesigned for music and Multi-Touch, iPod nano is smaller and lighter than ever.
Learn more
iPod shuffle
Clip and go with the colorful new iPod shuffle featuring clickable controls and VoiceOver.
Learn more
iTunes - Everything you need to be entertained
Music, movies, TV, shows and now friends. Get connected or
http://www.apple.com/itunes/
iPod - Arm, pocket, or car. Your iPod goes where you go.
Home. Work. And anyplace in between. Your iPod syncs easil
http://www.apple.com/ipod/everywhere/

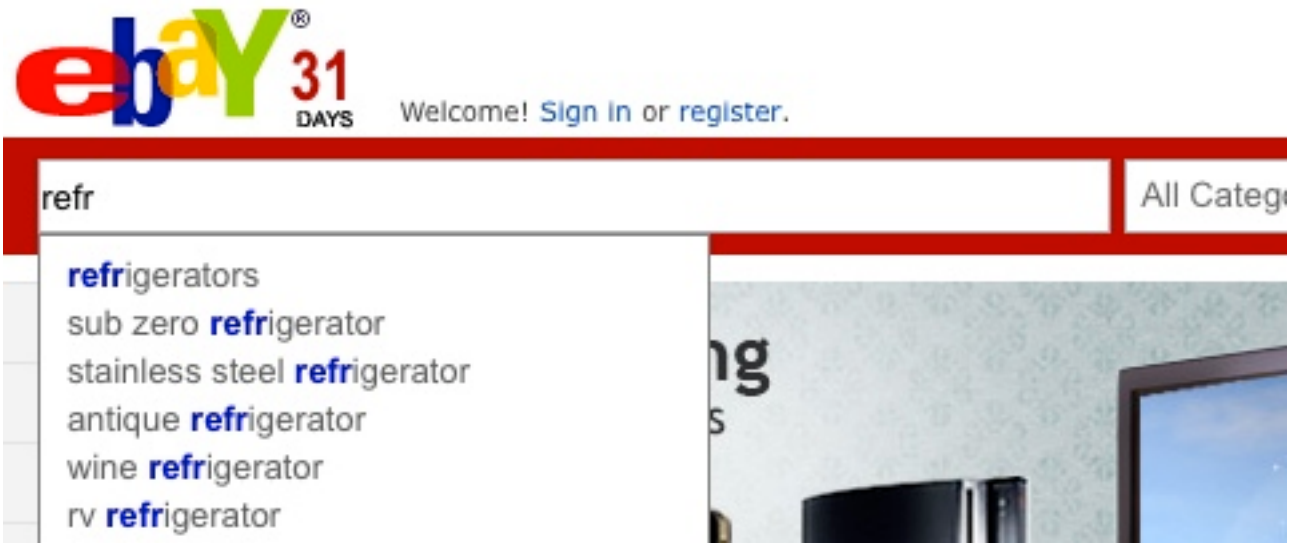
Apple puts what most users look for front and center. These best bets are supported with pictures.

Cluster results based on your or your users' tags, or get clustering algorithms to do the job. Clustering groups search results into categories but must be implemented with a powerful algorithm that can compete (or at least cooperate) with human tagging.


Tag Clusters
Photos with tags like france, seine and street
Photos with tags like eiffel, tower and night
Photos with tags like louvre, museum and pyramid

Tag clusters on Flickr group results.

Spell-check is also crucial. Many products have names that are hard to remember or type correctly. Users might think to correct their misspelling when they find poor results, but they will be annoyed at having to do that… or worse, they might think that the website either doesn't work properly or does not have their product.

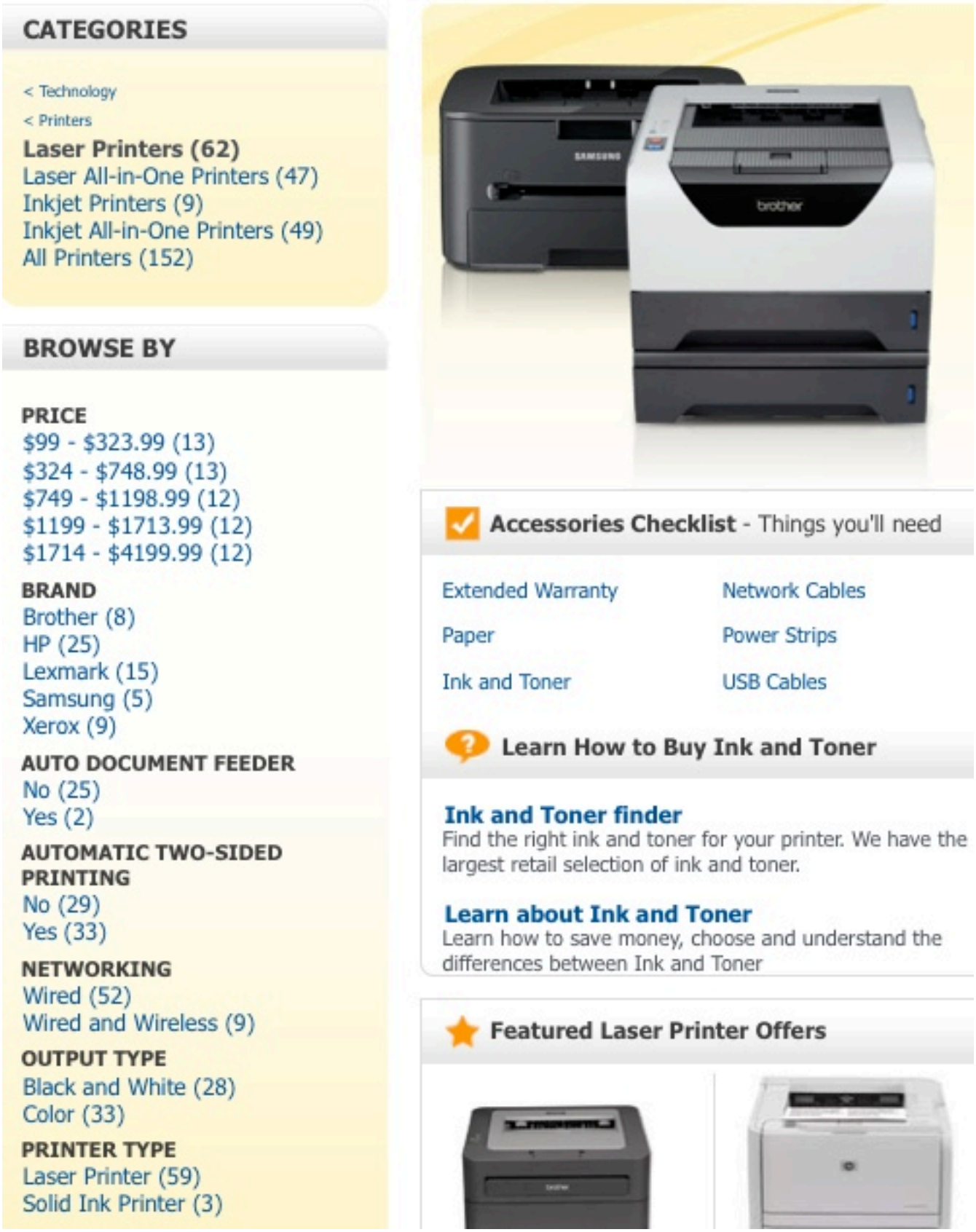


eBay helps users type complicated words.

Auto-suggestions can decrease the problems caused by mistyping or not knowing the proper terminology. Queries usually start with words, so unambiguous character inputting is crucial.

Communication and Language

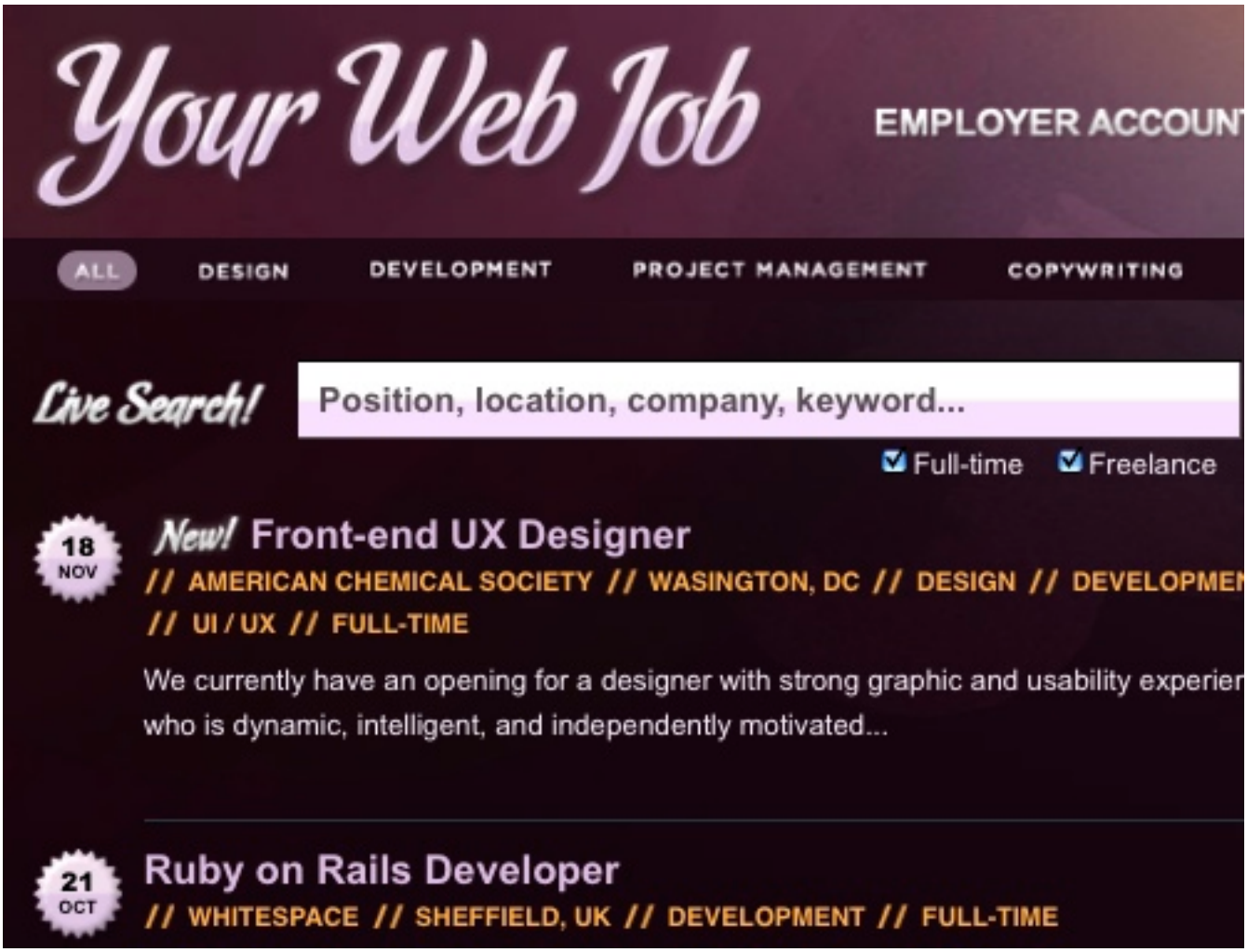
The success of your search depends heavily on your users' understanding of what facets, filters and parameters do. Label them in easily understood language. Think about non-native English speakers as well. Communicate the benefits of advanced search clearly and concisely, and show visitors that advanced search helps them be more effective. Change the terrifying phrase "Advanced search" to something friendlier, like "Better search" or "Smart search." If your advanced search functionality is integrated in the simple search area, just name the whole tool "Search."



OfficeMax names labels facets in simple and unambiguous language.

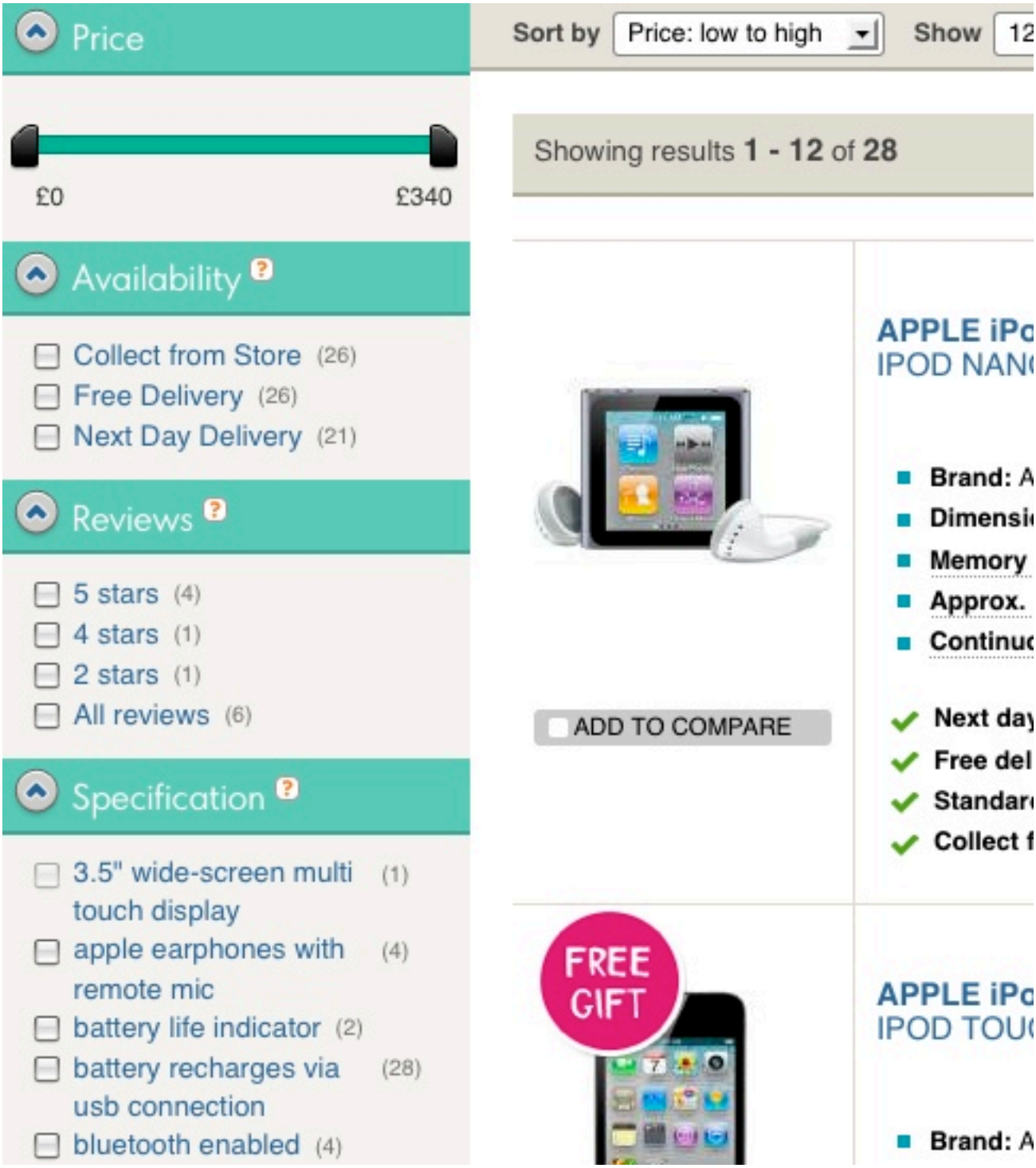
Grouping and Alignment

Group similar items and separate different items clearly. Indicate what is selected or not selected. Use a “Select” button that turns into an “Unselect” button when the user selects something, rather than a “Select all” checkbox (after checking “Select all,” the user might want to check other boxes, in which case the system might not behave consistently). When you arrange items in a facet, think of what would be the most common workflow for using the facet.



Your Web Job provides checkboxes for narrowing a search. The page has no search button; when the user finishes typing, the search begins. Although this way of handling search is unconventional, it works because the feature is fast.

Several interface patterns are available to make search more usable. Titled sections can effectively separate facets. Use bigger font for titles, and position them close to the content. Allow panels to be closed and moved. Align labels flush with input fields to make them more scannable, even when they vary in length. If you have a lot of facets or if the filters on the search results page have many options, you can arrange them using *card stacks*. But beware, information that users manipulate in one card won't be visible when they manipulate another. They may forget their settings or assume that search results will be based on the last-manipulated facet and that earlier filtering has been undone.



Comet lets users narrow their searches by clicking on facet links. Users can close and add facets, and the groupings show unambiguously what belongs to which facet. Note that Comet shows the number of items in a category beside each link.

Diagonal balance and a liquid layout make a search interface more usable. If users are able to change the size of the search interface, be aware of what happens to labels and values in drop-down lists when the size is set very small. Beautiful interfaces can fall apart if their behavior is not tested at many screen resolutions. And don't forget about mobile users, even if you don't have a mobile version yet.

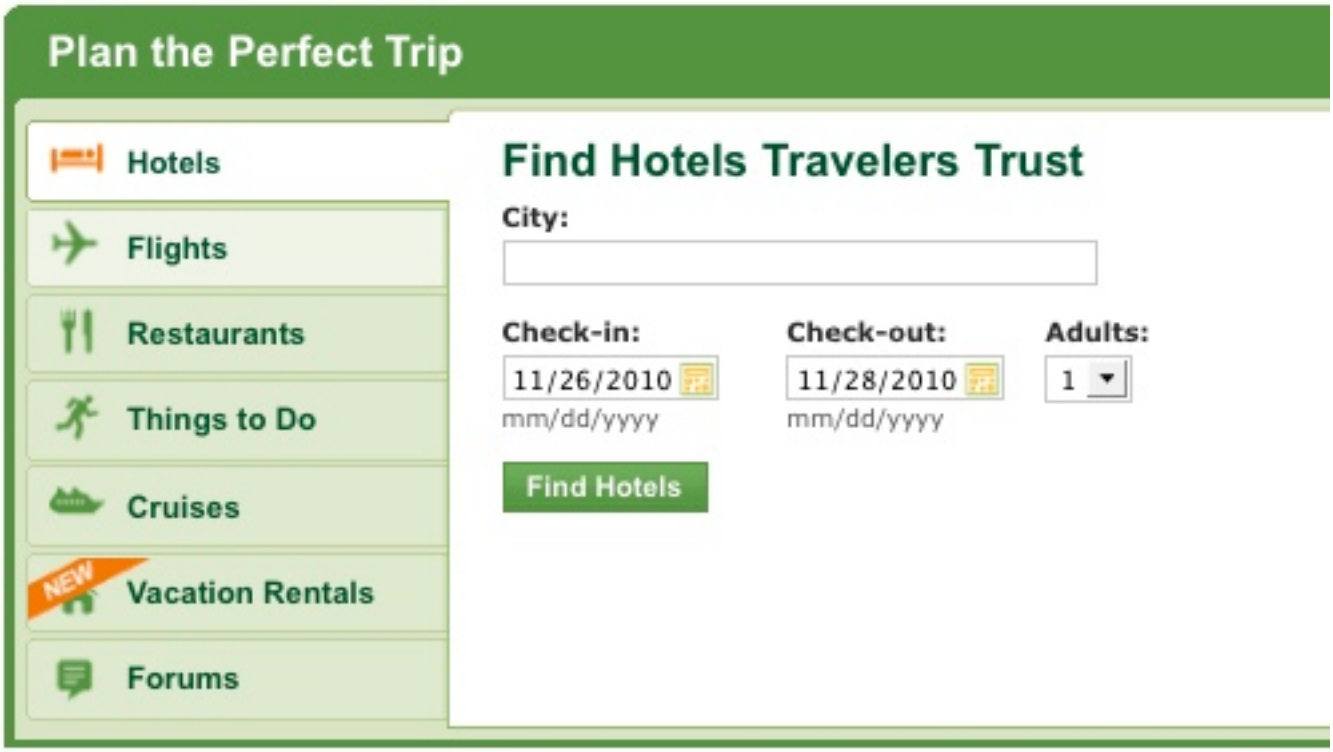
Buttons play an important role in a search interface. Have as few as possible, but anything that triggers an action should be a button. Do not disguise such functionality with a non-button-like element. Label meaningfully; avoid vague words like "Okay" and "Done." Make buttons stand out on the page so that users see them when they've finished what they're doing. Place buttons at the end of workflows. Do not put anything that can modify the results of a button-triggered action after the button.

Forms And Controls

The design of facets is up to you. Text boxes and drop-down lists are usually more than enough, but you might want to use other things that can make forms and controls more usable.

Choose sensible defaults for radio buttons and drop-down lists. Also, illustrations often convey information much better than words. Forgiving formats and structured formats help users input useful queries. Forgiving formats give users flexibility in entering data, while structured formats help them enter data more precisely.

Input prompts tell users what to do or type in a field, whereas input hints explain to users what they are expected to input in a field. Use them wisely: input prompts can be deleted, and too many input hints will annoy users. Also, the visual clutter might make them simply ignore important information.



TripAdvisor uses input hints, illustrated options and sensible defaults to enhance the usability of its parameter search.

Handling Results

Use dynamic filtering where possible. Users want immediate results, so don't disappoint. If dynamic filtering would make your architecture too slow, consider reprogramming the page or narrowing the number of options. It might be worth it.

Show the number of actual results as well as the number of results the user would get if they were to filter by some other options. "List" and "tiled" are the basic views, but alternative views could help users scan results more easily.

Conclusion

Contrary to widespread belief, advanced search is not an old lumbering monster of the past. If usability is taken into account and key structural and conceptual modifications are made, it can be an effective tool for increasing conversions and helping your users access more products. Of course, not every e-commerce website needs advanced search. You may have too few products or your products may be unique and hard to categorize. Advanced or faceted search is more useful when you have a wide variety of products.

15 Common Mistakes in E-Commerce Design (Part I)

By Cameron Chapman

Selling online can open up huge new markets for many businesses. When your store can be open 24/7 and you can reach a global market without the costs of mailings and call centers, it can be a huge boon to your business. But there are plenty of things to consider when designing an e-commerce site. It's not as simple as throwing up some shopping cart software and plopping products into a database.

There are tons of mistakes that online retailers make every day, all of them avoidable with a little careful planning. And even if you're already committing some of these mistakes, most of them are easy enough to fix. Avoiding them will greatly improve the experience of your customers.

Below are 15 of the most common mistakes that e-commerce sites make, as well as advice on how to avoid or fix them. Take the advice under consideration before embarking on a new e-commerce project or when thinking over your current e-commerce site, and make efforts to follow the recommendations outlined here.

1. A lack of detailed product information

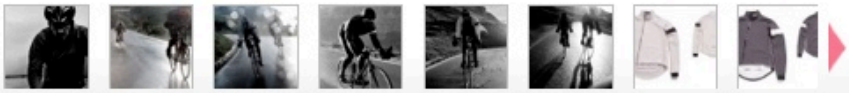
When you're shopping in a brick-and-mortar store, you have the advantage of being able to pick up an item, feel it, look at it from every angle, and read any information on the packaging or labels. Shopping online removes that interaction. E-commerce sites need to do the best they can to improve upon the in-store shopping experience.

How often have we gone to an online store and found their descriptions to be completely lacking? And if a customer is left wondering about the specifics of a product, they're more likely to go look for the information elsewhere. And unless your site's price is significantly lower than your competitors', they'll likely just buy from the other site.

What To Do About It

Provide as much product information as you can. Sizes, materials, weight, dimensions, and any other pertinent information depending on what the product is. For example, in an online clothing store, you might include the fabric type, sizes and colors available, a size chart (usually linked from multiple products), the weight or thickness of the item, the cut and fit of the item, care instructions, and comments about the brand or designer. Using descriptive words rather than simply technical terms can have a greater impact on the consumer.

Example



Rain Jacket

Vom Rapha-Continental-Team im Renneinsatz getestet, wurde Raphas Rain Jacket dafür entwickelt, den besten Schutz für Fahrten bei nassem Wetter zu gewährleisten.

Rain Jacket

€230.00

Die richtige Größe finden »

Größe / Stil: Bitte auswählen

Anzahl: 1

Kaufen

Zur Wunschliste hinzufügen »

Alle Jacken

- Rapha + Paul Smith City Rain Jacket
- Classic Softshell
- Softshell Gilet
- Women's Classic Softshell Jacket
- Wind Jacket
- Women's Wind Jacket
- Rapha Gilet
- Tailored Jacket
- Bomber Jacket
- Tweed Softshell

Kategorien

- Jacken
- Trikots und Baselayers
- T-Shirts und Hemden
- Shorts und Hosen
- Team
- Mützen und Kappen
- Handschuhe
- Accessoires
- Taschen

Rain Jacket

Vom Rapha-Continental-Team während einer sehr nassen Tour of California getestet, bietet Raphas Rain Jacket beste Funktion bei Regenwetter.

Die Regenjacke wurde für Fahrten bei extrem nasser Witterung konzipiert und ist eine robustere Version von Raphas „Stowaway". Sie ist vielfältig einsetzbar, so etwa als absolut winddichte Außenschicht an kalten Tagen, und lässt sich klein genug zusammenfalten, um in einer Trikottasche Platz zu finden.

Die Jacke ist schmal geschnitten und mit einer verlängerten Rückenpartie zum Abhalten von Spritzwasser ausgestattet. Im Schulterbereich halten verschweißte Nähte trocken und Neoprenbündchen wärmen die Handgelenke; somit sind besonders empfindliche Körperpartien bei schlechtem Wetter optimal geschützt. Spezielle Einsätze unter den Armen sorgen auch bei rauen Bedingungen für extrem gute Atmungsaktivität.

Innen sind die Nähte in attraktiver Kontrastfarbe gehalten. Die Jacke verfügt über einen seitlich versetzt eingenähten arretierbaren Reißverschluss, wasserdicht und mit einem Fleece-Kinnschutz versehen. Auch die Rückentasche kommt mit wasserdichtem Reißverschluss; reflektierende Rapha-Logos finden sich am Kragen und am unteren Rücken. Auch Ärmel und Seitenpartien tragen reflektierende Besätze.

Artikeldetails | Verfügbarkeit | Größen

AUSFÜHRUNG	GRÖSSE	AUF LAGER
Grau	XS	Aus
	S	Aus
	M	Aus
	L	Aus
	XL	Aus
	XXL	Aus
Creme	XS	Aus
	S	Aus
	M	Aus
	L	Gut
	XL	Gut
	XXL	Gut

Bleiben Sie über neue Artikel auf dem Laufenden! »

www.rapha.cc

2. Hiding Contact Information

Consumers want to know that they're dealing with a real company when they hand over their credit card information. They want to know that if they have a problem they'll be able to talk to a real person and get the help they need. If your site doesn't provide any contact information, or hides it so the consumer can't find it easily, they're less likely to trust your site, and therefore less likely to do business with you.

What To Do About It

Put your contact information in an easy-to-find place on every page of your website. The most obvious places to put your contact information are either in your header, the top of your sidebar, or in your footer. Provide multiple means of contact if possible. A contact form, email address, phone number, and mailing address all add to the level of customer trust. Remember, too, that the more expensive or technical the product you're selling, the more likely a consumer is going to want more contact information.

Example

www.zappos.com

3. A Long or Confusing Checkout Process

This is one of the most damaging mistakes an e-commerce site can make. You have to make it as easy as possible for your customers to hand over their credit card information and complete their order. The more steps you put between them placing an item in their cart and actually paying for it, the more opportunities you give them to leave your site without completing their purchase.

The ideal checkout process includes a single page for consumers to check their order and enter their billing and shipping information, and a confirmation page before they submit their order. Anything more than that is only an obstacle to completing the checkout process.

What To Do About It

Follow the ideal model as closely as you can. If you have to include other pages, try to make them as quick and easy to fill out as possible. Combine pages if you can, and use two-column layouts for certain sections (like putting billing and shipping information next to each other) to make pages appear shorter.

4. Requiring an Account to Order

This ties in directly to the previous item. If you require a customer to sign up for an account before they can place an order, it's another obstacle you've placed in their path. Which is more important to you: getting the order or capturing customer information? Remember that the second option may mean losing some customers.

What To Do About It

There's an easy fix for this. Instead of requiring a customer to sign up for an account before they order, offer them the option at the end of their ordering process. Give them the option to save their account information to make placing future orders easier or to track the status of their current order. Many customers will opt to save their information, and you won't be driving away customers before they've completed their order.

5. An Inadequate Site Search Engine

If a customer knows exactly what they're looking for, many will opt to use a search engine instead of sifting through categories and filters. You need to make sure that the search feature on your site works well, and preferably has filters for letting customers refine their results.

How often have you searched for a product on a large e-commerce site and been returned with hundreds of applicable results? While the variety of options can be nice, if half of those results are nothing like what you're looking for, it's more an inconvenience than anything else. Including a way for customers to filter their search results by category or feature eliminates this problem.

What To Do About It

Make sure the e-commerce software you're using has a good built-in search engine, or look for plugins to extend its functionality. Ideally, an e-commerce search engine should let users search by keyword and then refine results based on the categories your site includes. Let users sort their search results based on standard criteria (most popular, highest or lowest

price, newest item, etc.) as well as eliminating items that don't fit within a certain category.

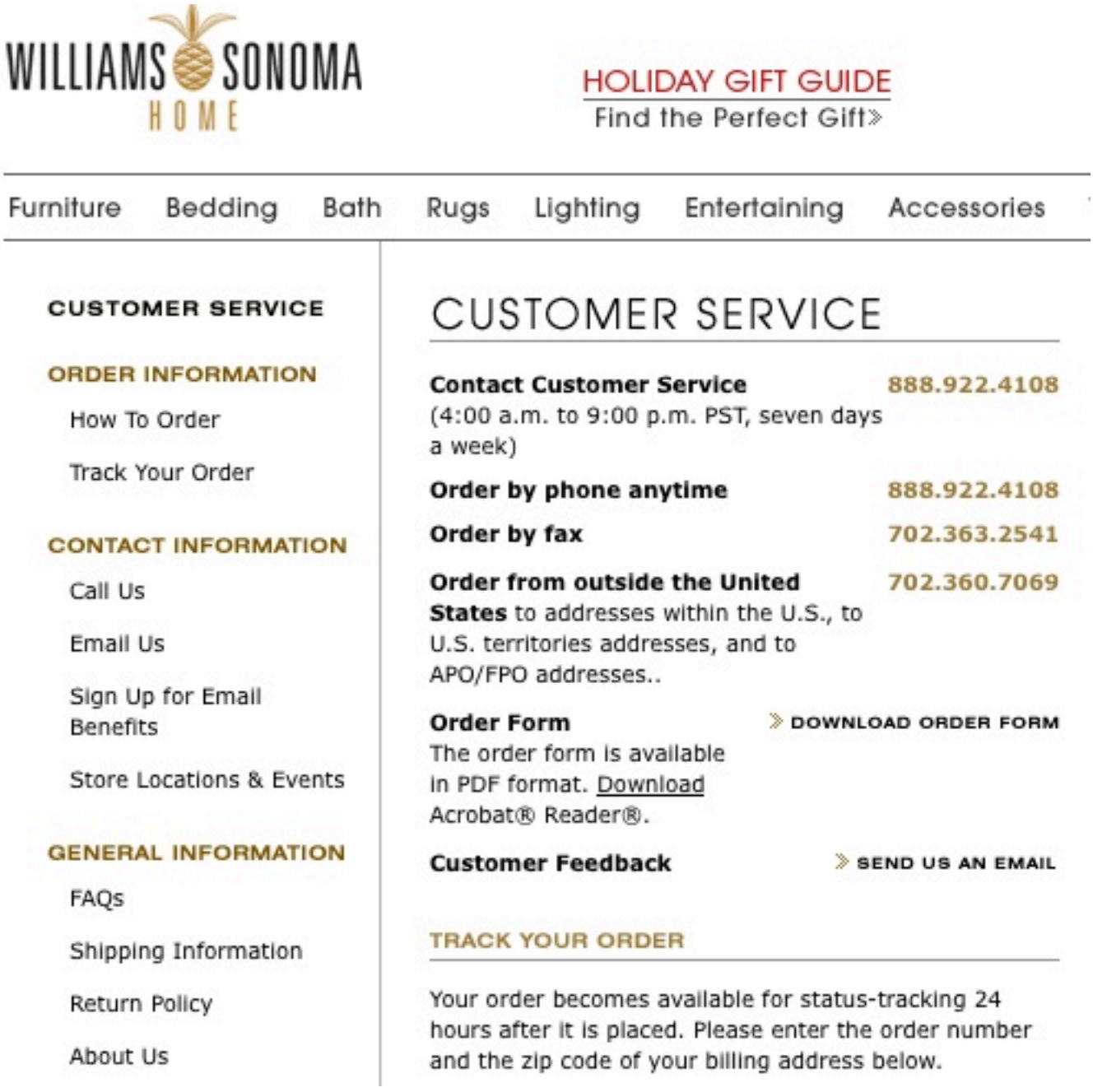
6. Poor Customer Service Options

This is similar to the hiding contact information bit above. You need to make it easy for customers to get in touch with you if they have a problem or question. Make it clear what the best way to contact you is if they have a technical question, a sales question, or they want to return an item. Offering a help request form for customers to fill out can instill more confidence than just an email address.

What To Do About It

Use a ticketing system for customer service inquiries, especially if you don't have a phone number available. Make sure that you post a FAQ that covers common questions customers might have, like what your return policy is or what to do if they need to order parts or replacement items.

Example



www.wshome.com

7. Tiny Product Images

Since consumers can't physically handle the products you're selling before placing an order on your website, you need to do as much as you can to recreate and improve upon that experience. Tiny product images don't effectively do this.

What To Do About It

Either provide large images right on the product page or allow users to click on an image to zoom in. You want users to be able to view the image as large as is practical on an average monitor. This means an image that enlarges to 1024×768 pixels is a good size to aim for.

Example

www.bridge55.com

8. Only One Product Image

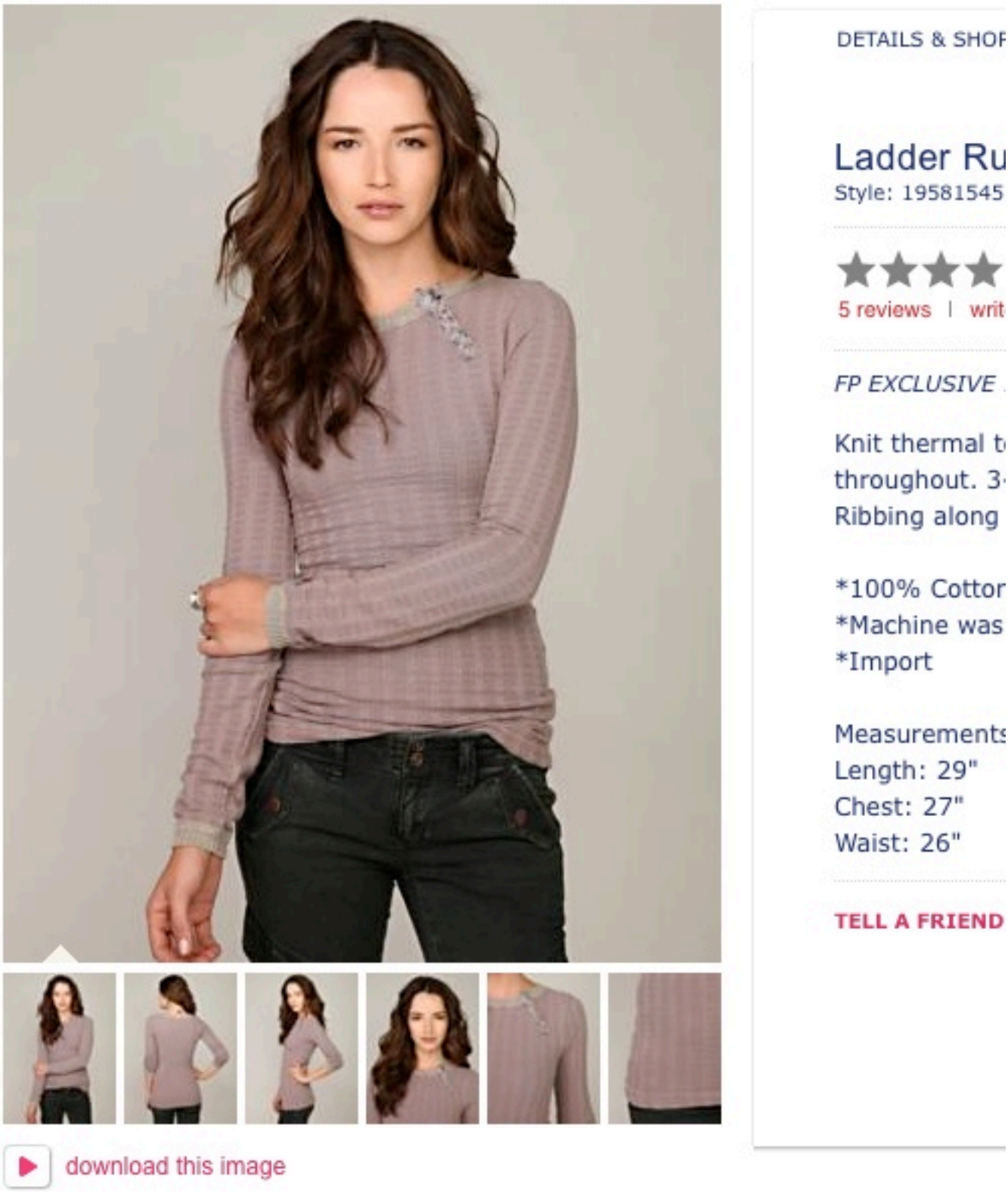
Unless your product is delivered digitally (and even sometimes if it is), you'll want to provide multiple images from different angles. An image in each color, of the front, back, and sides, and even detailed shots of specific features can all go a long way toward making a consumer more likely to buy from you.

What To Do About It

This one's simple: include more images. Four or five images of each product are ideal, offering enough views to allow a consumer to feel comfortable that they know exactly what they're getting.

Examples

www.designbyhumans.com



www.freepeople.com

15 Common Mistakes in E-Commerce Design (Part II)

By Cameron Chapman

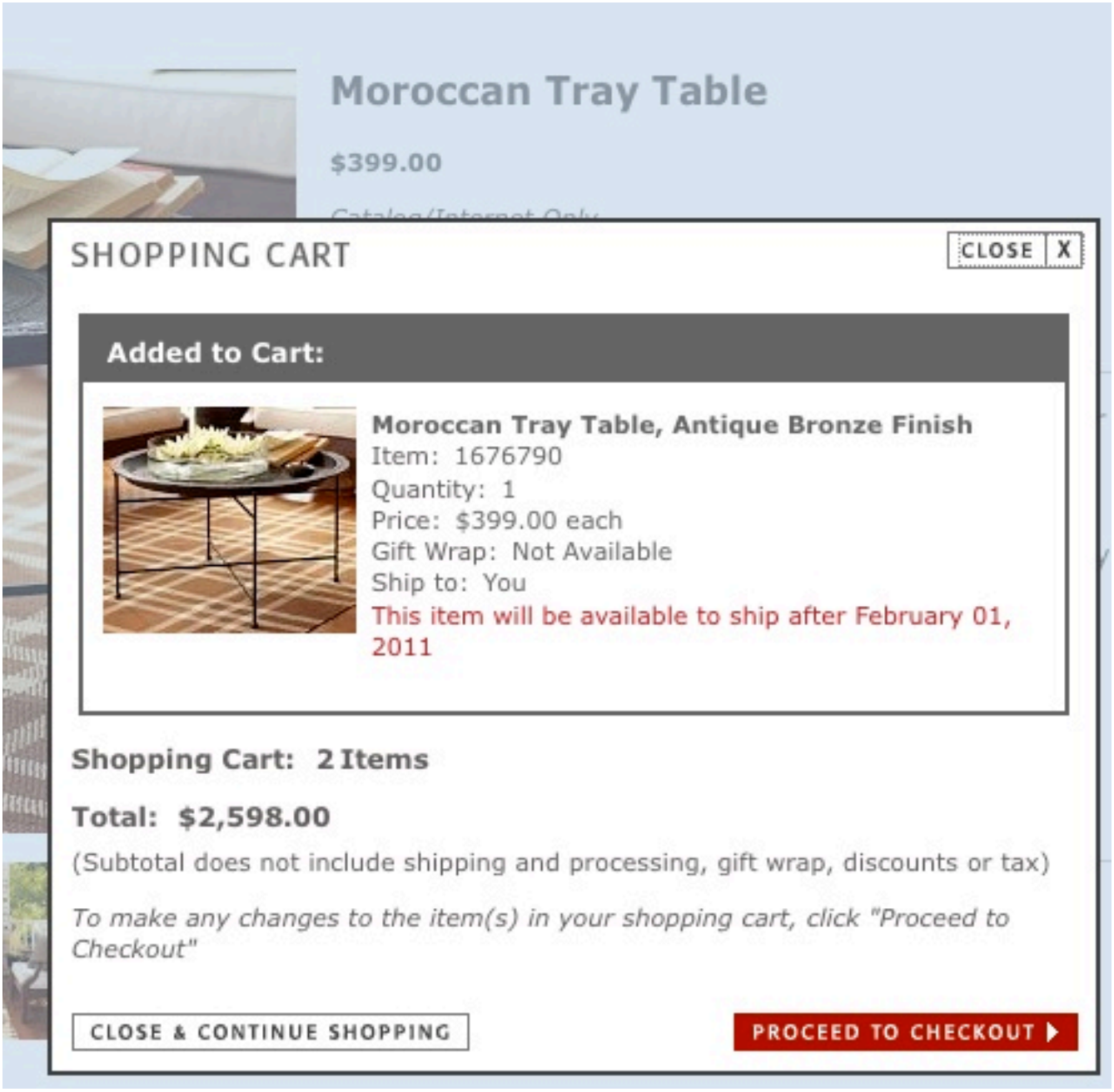
9. A Poor Shopping Cart Design

Your shopping cart is an incredibly important part of your e-commerce website. It needs to allow users to add multiple products, to revise the quantities or other options about those products, and it needs to remain transparent at the same time. Not exactly the easiest thing to do, right?

What To Do About It

Make sure your cart lets a user add an item and then return to the last page they were on. Even better: allow them to add an item to their cart without ever leaving the page they're on (by using a mini cart). Let your customers edit the quantities of items in their cart or remove an item from their cart. And let them preview what shipping charges will be before they start the checkout process.

Example


Moroccan Tray Table
$399.00
SHOPPING CART
CLOSE X
Added to Cart:
Moroccan Tray Table, Antique Bronze Finish
Item: 1676790
Quantity: 1
Price: $399.00 each
Gift Wrap: Not Available
Ship to: You
This item will be available to ship after February 01, 2011
Shopping Cart: 2 Items
Total: $2,598.00
(Subtotal does not include shipping and processing, gift wrap, discounts or tax)
To make any changes to the item(s) in your shopping cart, click "Proceed to Checkout"
CLOSE & CONTINUE SHOPPING
PROCEED TO CHECKOUT

www.potterybarn.com

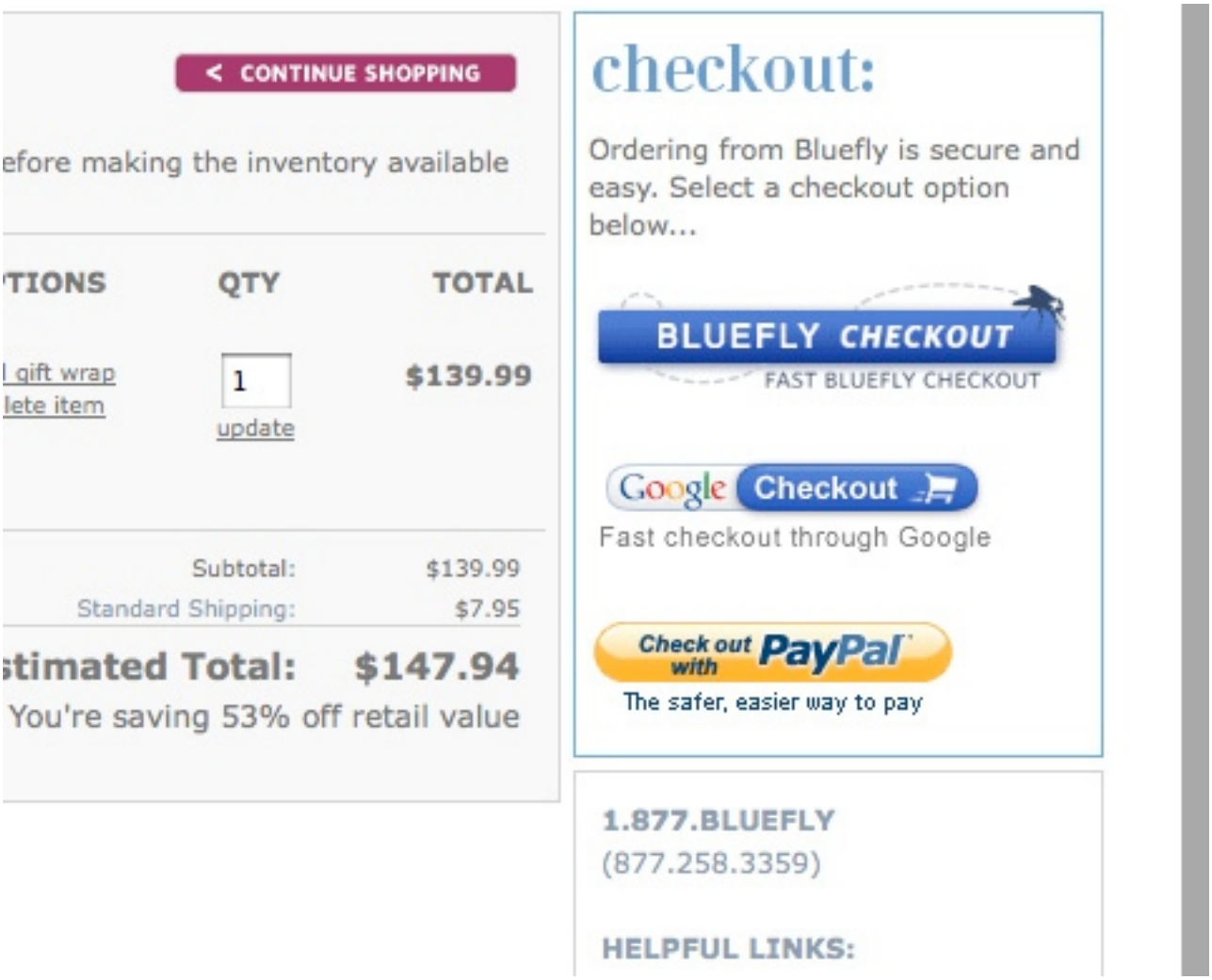
10. Lack of Payment Options

There are plenty of sites out there that only allow users to pay with Visa or MasterCard, or to only pay with a PayPal account. There's no reason for this anymore. What about the person who has an AmEx and doesn't have or want a PayPal account? What about the person who doesn't have a credit card and wants to pay straight from their bank account? You need to provide as many payment solutions as is practical to optimize the number of orders you get.

What To Do About It

Use a payment service that lets customers pay with each major credit card, and preferably also with an electronic check. Adding a PayPal checkout option increases the choices your customers have, making them more likely to purchase from you. Considering different consumers have different preferences when it comes to making online payments, catering to as many as you can means you've expanded your customer base.

Example



www.bluefly.com

11. Not Including Related Products

You've probably noticed when you go to a brick and mortar store that they group similar products together, or otherwise make it easy for you to find products that are related to your search. They'll put a battery display in the electronics section, or include cell phone cases near the cell phones. The same can be done on your website, and can increase add-on sales for you business.

What To Do About It

Use an e-commerce platform that lets you include related products on product description pages. A platform that will let you manually choose related products can also give you a big advantage, since you may see relations that a software program doesn't (such as coordinating clothing pieces to create an outfit).

Example

Alpaca crewneck sweater

$98.00 item 33011

One for the ages—a casually refined classic in a premium wool and alpaca blend. Our designer used a unique reverse
More...

select size | size charts

atlantic navy

color: atlantic navy

$98.00

(colors not listed are sold out)

1 quantity

ADD TO BAG

For style advice, tips and questions you don't want to ask your friends, email jack@jcrew.com. He's your style wingman.

Customers also love

Marled rollneck™ sweater
$98.00

Fine lambswool marled crewneck sweater
$64.50

www.jcrew.com

12. Confusing Navigation

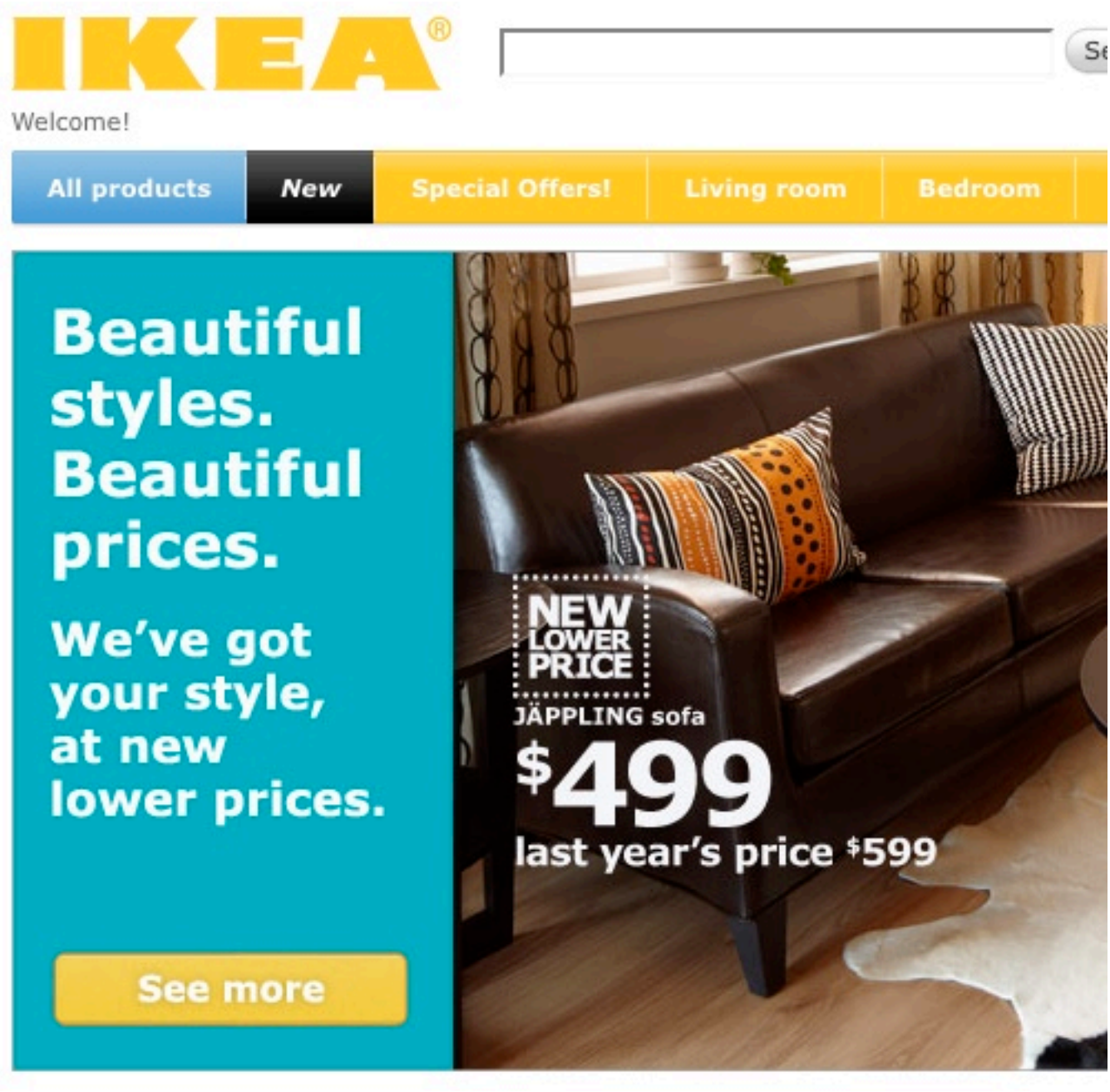
There's nothing worse than trying to find a product on a site with confusing navigation. Or even worse, an online store that doesn't use categories or otherwise separate their merchandise to make it easier to find a specific type of product. The same goes for sites that have categories with no products in them or with only one or two items. Why even bother with a category?

What To Do About It

Think through your categories and navigation elements carefully before you start putting products in your catalog. Make sure that every category has at least a few products in it, or else group smaller categories together (or include them in larger, similar categories). Make it easy for customers to look through different categories, get to their shopping cart, and otherwise move around your site.

Examples

www.wshome.com



www.ikea.com

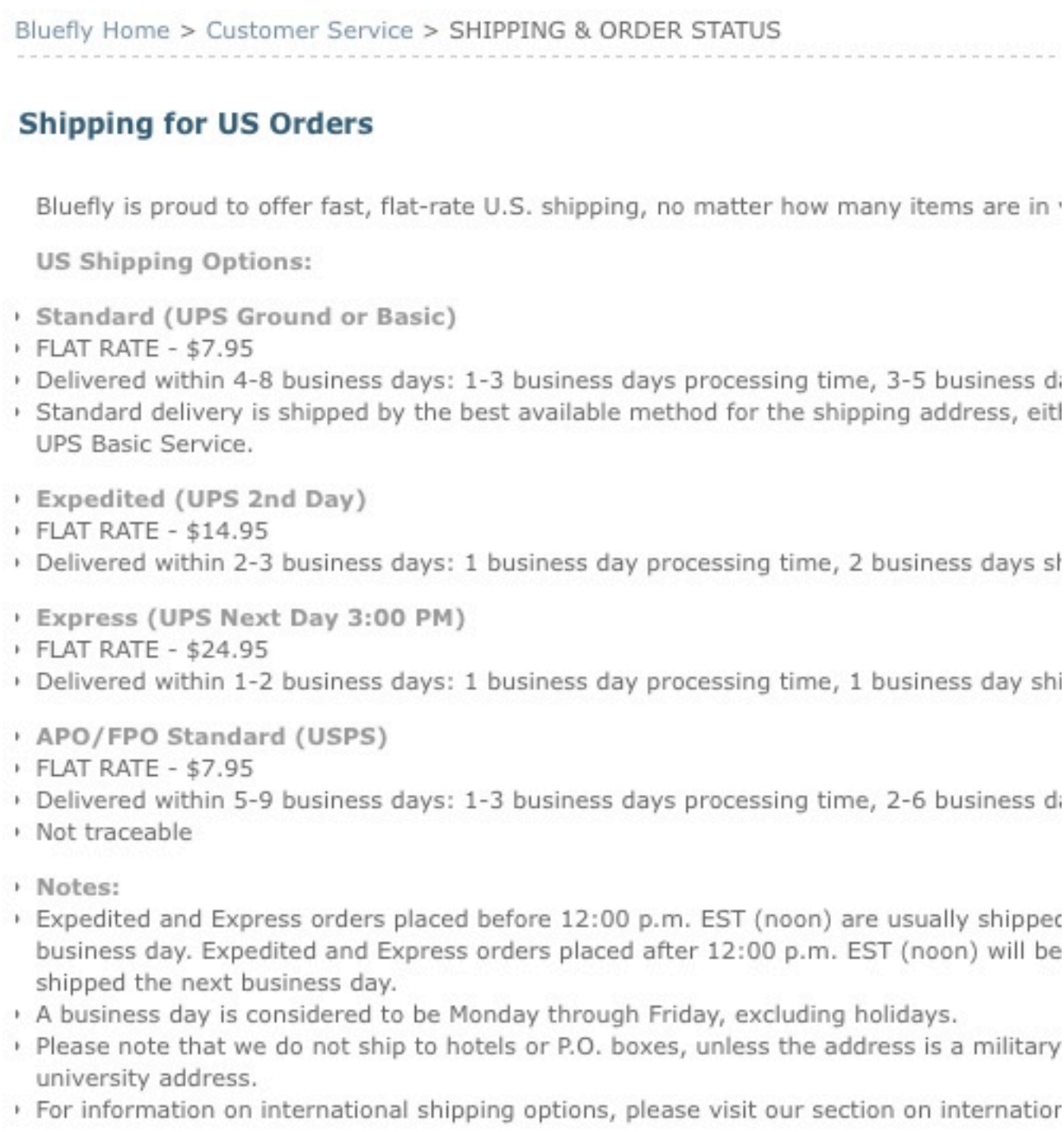
13. Not Including Shipping Rates

There's no good reason not to include accurate shipping rates on your site. I've abandoned purchases on numerous occasions because it said something like "We'll email you with an accurate shipping quote for approval before processing your order." When shopping online, I want to be able to complete my order all at one time, without having to wait around for an email to decide whether the shipping charges are too high. Include your rates on your site, no matter what.

What To Do About It

Most major shipping companies and the USPS offer shipping calculators on their website, and there are plugins or widgets available for most major shopping cart systems to figure shipping charges on your site. Use one. If you can't use one for some reason, then use a flat shipping rate that's high enough to cover whatever it is you need to ship. For particularly heavy or large items, you can always include a freight surcharge in the price (just be sure to indicate that's where the additional cost is going).

Examples



Bluefly Home > Customer Service > SHIPPING & ORDER STATUS

Shipping for US Orders

Bluefly is proud to offer fast, flat-rate U.S. shipping, no matter how many items are in

US Shipping Options:

- **Standard (UPS Ground or Basic)**
- FLAT RATE - $7.95
- Delivered within 4-8 business days: 1-3 business days processing time, 3-5 business d
- Standard delivery is shipped by the best available method for the shipping address, eit UPS Basic Service.

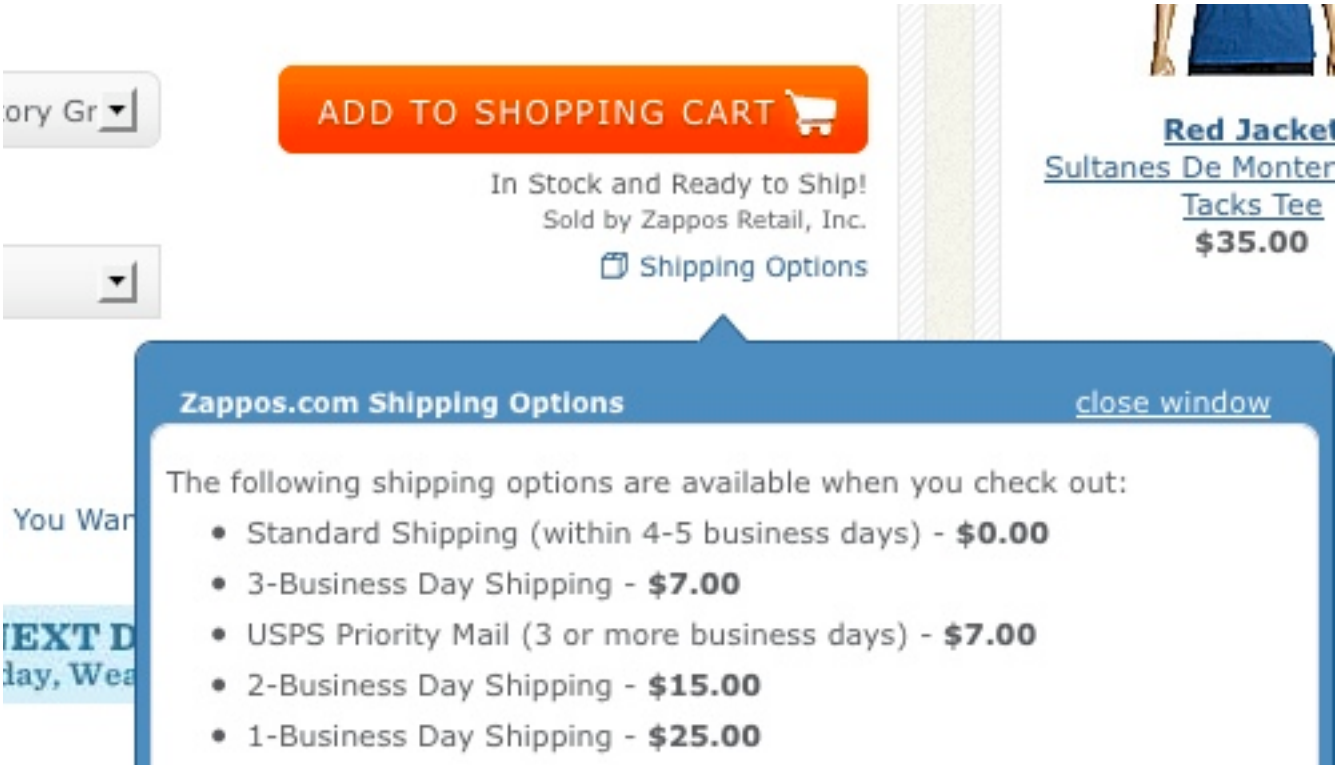
- **Expedited (UPS 2nd Day)**
- FLAT RATE - $14.95
- Delivered within 2-3 business days: 1 business day processing time, 2 business days s

- **Express (UPS Next Day 3:00 PM)**
- FLAT RATE - $24.95
- Delivered within 1-2 business days: 1 business day processing time, 1 business day shi

- **APO/FPO Standard (USPS)**
- FLAT RATE - $7.95
- Delivered within 5-9 business days: 1-3 business days processing time, 2-6 business d
- Not traceable

- **Notes:**
- Expedited and Express orders placed before 12:00 p.m. EST (noon) are usually shipped business day. Expedited and Express orders placed after 12:00 p.m. EST (noon) will be shipped the next business day.
- A business day is considered to be Monday through Friday, excluding holidays.
- Please note that we do not ship to hotels or P.O. boxes, unless the address is a military university address.
- For information on international shipping options, please visit our section on internatior

www.bluefly.com


ADD TO SHOPPING CART
In Stock and Ready to Ship!
Sold by Zappos Retail, Inc.
Shipping Options
Red Jacket
Sultanes De Monter
Tacks Tee
$35.00
Zappos.com Shipping Options
close window
The following shipping options are available when you check out:
Standard Shipping (within 4-5 business days) - $0.00
3-Business Day Shipping - $7.00
USPS Priority Mail (3 or more business days) - $7.00
2-Business Day Shipping - $15.00
1-Business Day Shipping - $25.00

www.zappos.com

14. Not Including Store Policies

Before a customer buys from you, they'll likely want to know what your shipping policies, return policies, and other store rules are. And there's no reason not to post this information in a FAQ or somewhere else on your site. Making your store policies clear upfront can save a lot of headaches later on from customers who are unhappy with an order they've placed.

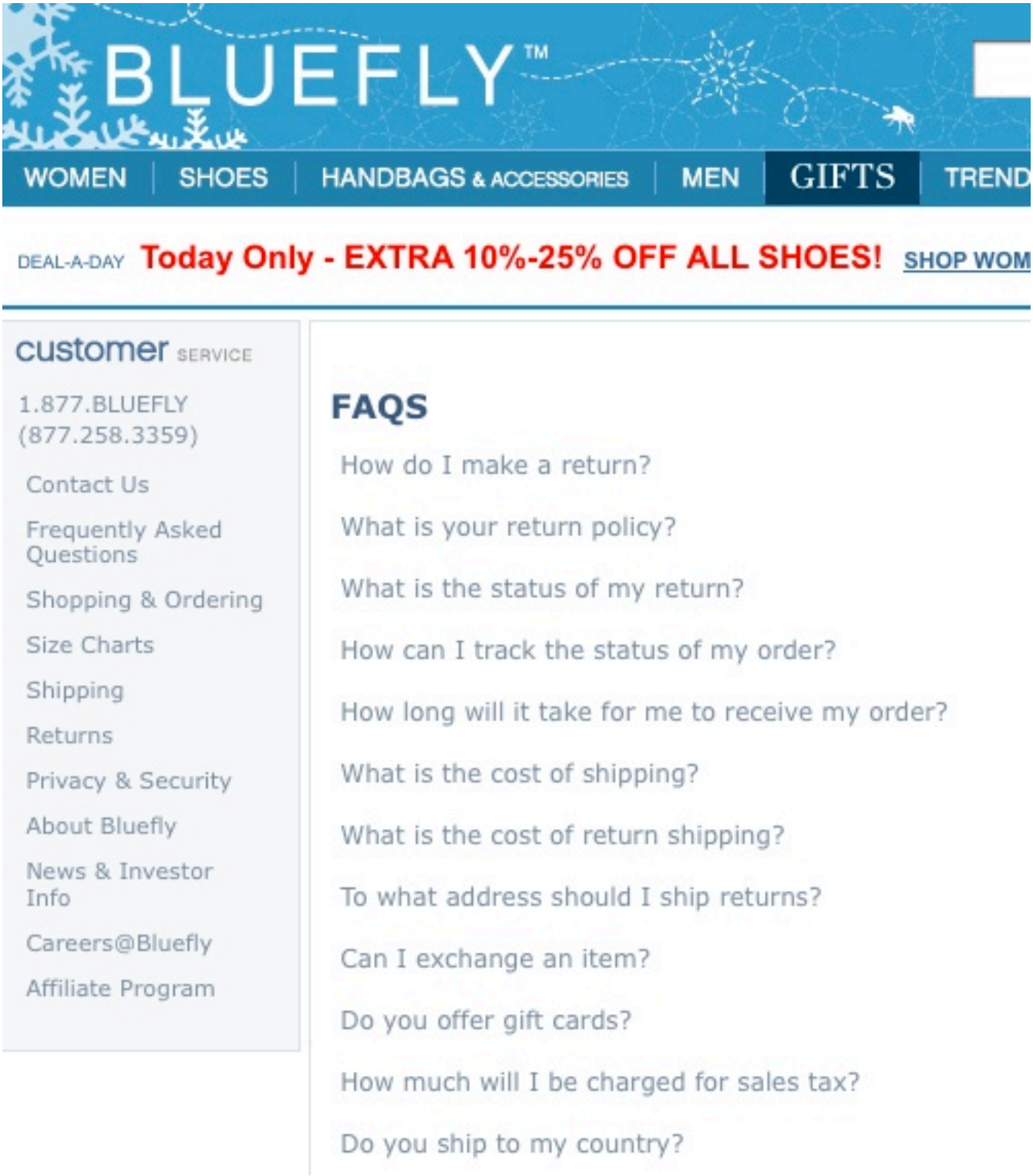
What To Do About It

Use an FAQ or store policies section on your site to spell out exactly what your rules are for different kinds of customer interaction. It's something that can save you tons of problems down the road.

Examples

pure little
EST.
welcome
2008
WHY ORGANIC?
REGIS
Organic. Baby. Love.
search by brand
new arrivals
newborn essentials
organic baby clothes
organic toddler clothes
organic baby bedding
organic baby bath & body
organic baby bibs & bottles
natural baby laundry
baby music & organic books
organic baby toys
organic baby gifts
holiday gift guide
SALE
home / customer service
customer service
ordering and payment
pure and little accepts Visa and MasterCard. pay
advertised sale prices are automatically calculate
in the designated field on the shopping cart befo
discount from the total order. if the store credit
balance available to use for future purchase.
shipping and handling policy
orders are shipped within the united states via U
customers have the option to ship UPS Ground,
shipping costs are automatically calculated and
customers can estimate shipping and tax by ente
DELIVER TO P.O. BOXES.
return policy
you may return non-sale merchandise for excha
shipping and gift wrapping charges are non-refu
with original tags and packaging. returned items

www.pureandlittle.com



www.bluefly.com

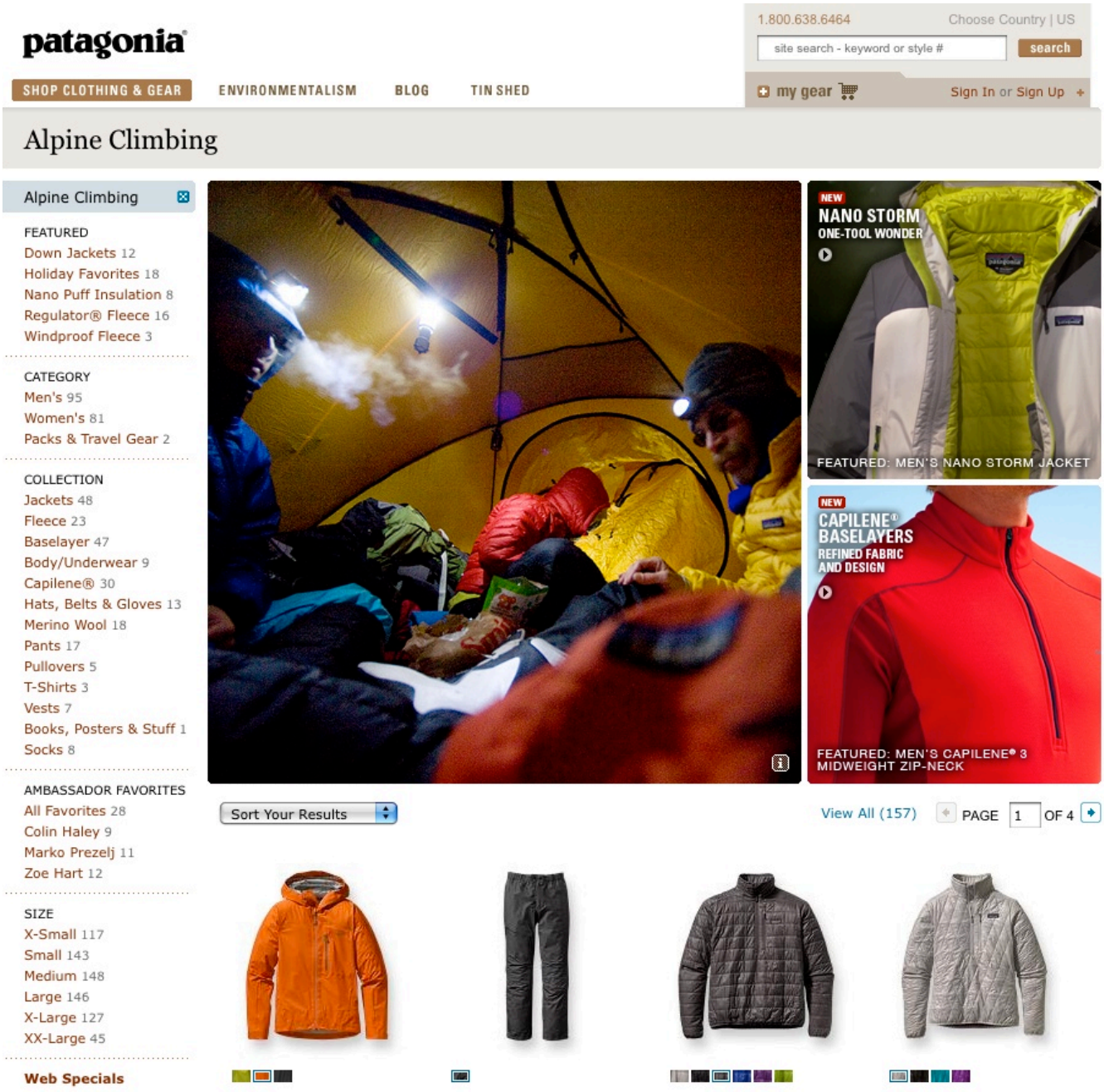
15. Not Putting Focus on the Products

The goal of an e-commerce site is to sell products (or, at least, that's what the goal should be). If your site puts more focus on bells and whistles or the design itself, it's not achieving that primary goal. Make sure your site displays your products first, and everything else second.

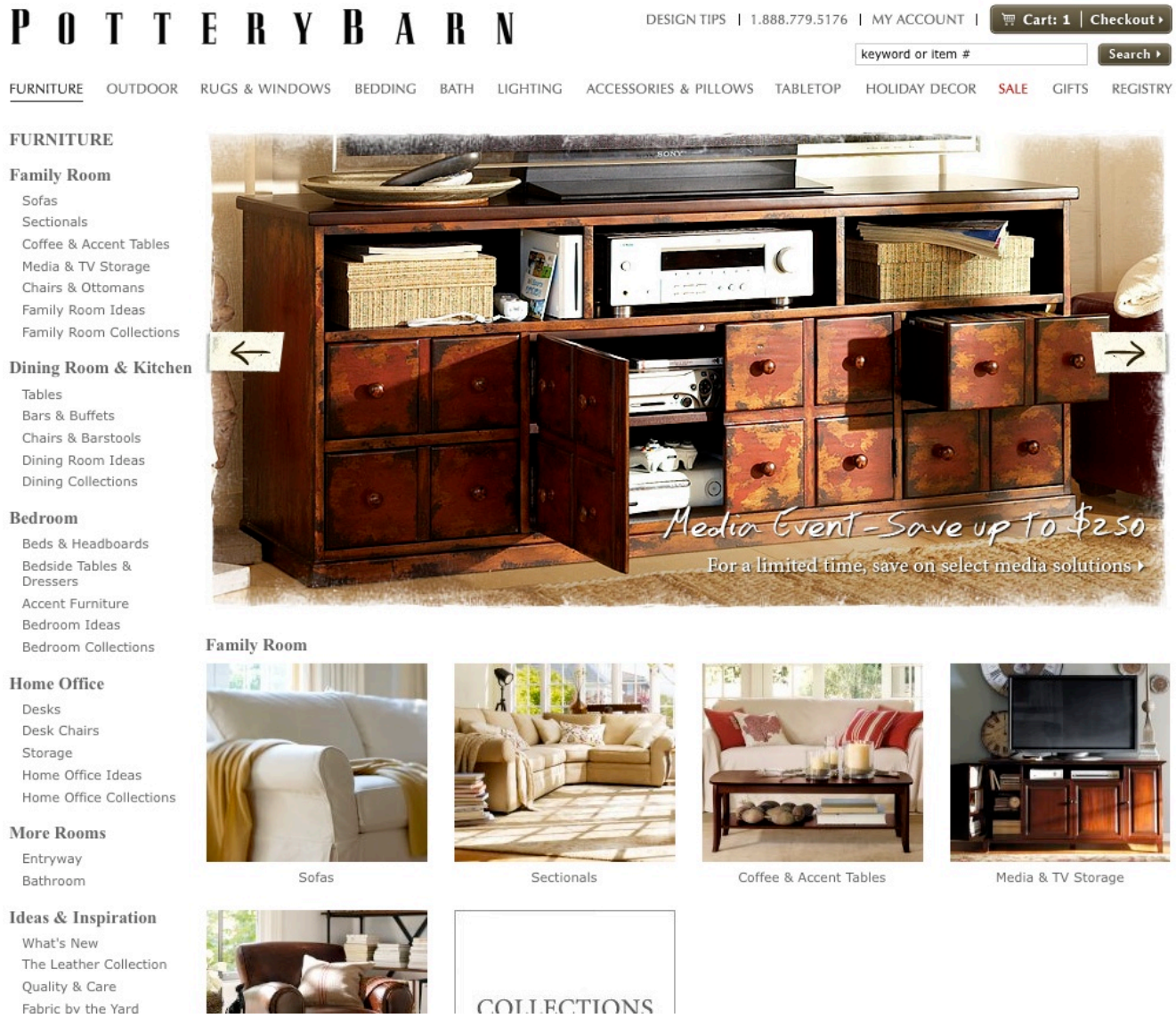
What To Do About It

Think about how products are displayed in brick and mortar stores. While an in-store or window display may show a lot more than just the products for sale, they all contribute to showcasing the products in their most flattering light. Do the same with your website. Make sure that every design element present is doing something to showcase your products in their best possible light.

Examples



www.patagonia.com



www.potterybarn.com

E-Commerce: Fundamentals of a Successful Re-Design

By Peter Crawfurd and Michael Yang

E-commerce re-designs can double your sales over night permanently, but they can also cut them in half. In this miniseries we'll be looking at what elements are especially important and whether you should be doing an e-commerce re-design.

For the sake of clarity, re-design for this article means when at least the site has a new look, this can include product photography, usability, copywriting, and obviously the layout. It involves changing several main areas of the site in one go.

Should you be doing a re-design?

As cofounder of an e-commerce store we have experienced first hand how a re-design can double sales consistently from the day the new site is launched. That said, the darker side of the story is that a re-design usually involves either months of work and/or a lot of expenses depending on the depth of the re-design.

It is important to figure out whether these costs will outweigh the profits of the increase in conversion rate. Despite conversion rates being tricky to predict, there are some significant determinants that can help determine whether you'll achieve a sizeable increase in conversion rate.

If your store is experiencing one or more of the following symptoms you should consider a re-design:

1. Your current design is the first version. It is usually easiest to improve your conversion rate and overall sales with the first re-design. There may be obvious and not too development heavy elements that were not ideally developed in the first version due to time or financial restraints that would improve the site significantly.
2. Your original layout was based primarily on creativity. In many cases web designers out weigh what will look best over what will be easiest to use. If your site layout is non-traditional in many cases shoppers will have to learn how to use your layout, although most users will learn it, it's not exactly what you want them to think about when they should be focused on your product.
3. You have very few or mediocre product photos. Product photos have a profound effect on conversion rates. If you decide to take great product photos then in 9 out of 10 cases you'll need to match the graphical elements on your site with the level of your photos to get most out of them.
4. Your store's conversion rate is less than 0.5%. When a conversion rate is at this level there are most likely some fundamental problems regarding your site. Doing a complete and intelligent makeover of your site at this level is likely to double your conversion rate. This is assuming that you have targeted traffic.

Design – Making The Right Improvements

Within the first few seconds, visitors need to understand where to find things on your site. The least bit confusion of where to find certain information on a site can lead to quick exits, higher bounce rates, and most importantly a loss of potential customers.

The key here is keeping things as simple as possible. It's important to let the product(s) get the attention of the visitor, not the design of the website. Designing a bold and eye catching first version of a site is not an uncommon mistake, meaning that a move toward a more toned down version for the redesign would usually improve conversion. That said it is important that the site remains professional and sleek looking for gaining trust.

Testing it

In general, re-design is a tricky beast and making changes to the usability may actually decrease conversion rates. That's why if you have the resources for it, then doing a so called A/B split test on conversion rates of your new design can avoid surprises after a re-launch. This would typically be done with an A/B split test, which is when you send half of your visitors to each version of the site. Google's Website Optimizer is a free tool that can be used for this test.

Once you're past the re-design and have the fundamentals of the site fixed, you'll see that testing different parts of your site such as the shopping cart, opt in rate, and home page can give you concrete results and a clear path to further improvements.

Product Photography

Product photos should be a priority in re-design as they can have a profound effect on the conversion rate and ideally they should match the new design of the site. Sharp and simple photos are often what will do the trick, but this can be easier said than done. Keeping the shots really simple are important as most good product photography have very subtle backgrounds if any at all to keep the focus on the product itself.

It can look deceitfully simple to take attractive photos, but with a basic lighting set up and a good camera wonders can be achieved if you already have some photography experience. However, the difficulty of product photography varies a lot from product to product. Getting a great shot of a mug can be a simple five minute job while clothing can take hours.

Hire a product photographer to skip time consuming learning curves, choosing a photographer that has experience with your type of product will help save you time. Be sure that the photographer understands what kind of photo needs to be taken. It can quickly become a really expensive project if it drags out. If possible agree on a set price for the project and not an hourly based model, this will leave room for a few inevitable re-takes.

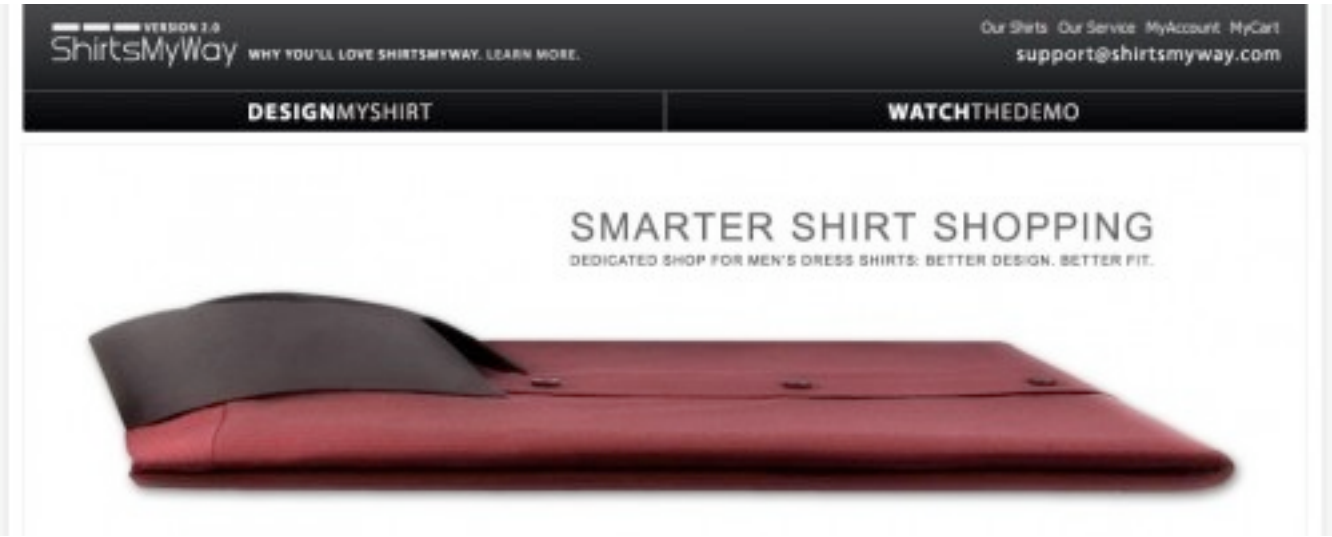
Ideally there are three different types of photos you'll want on the site:

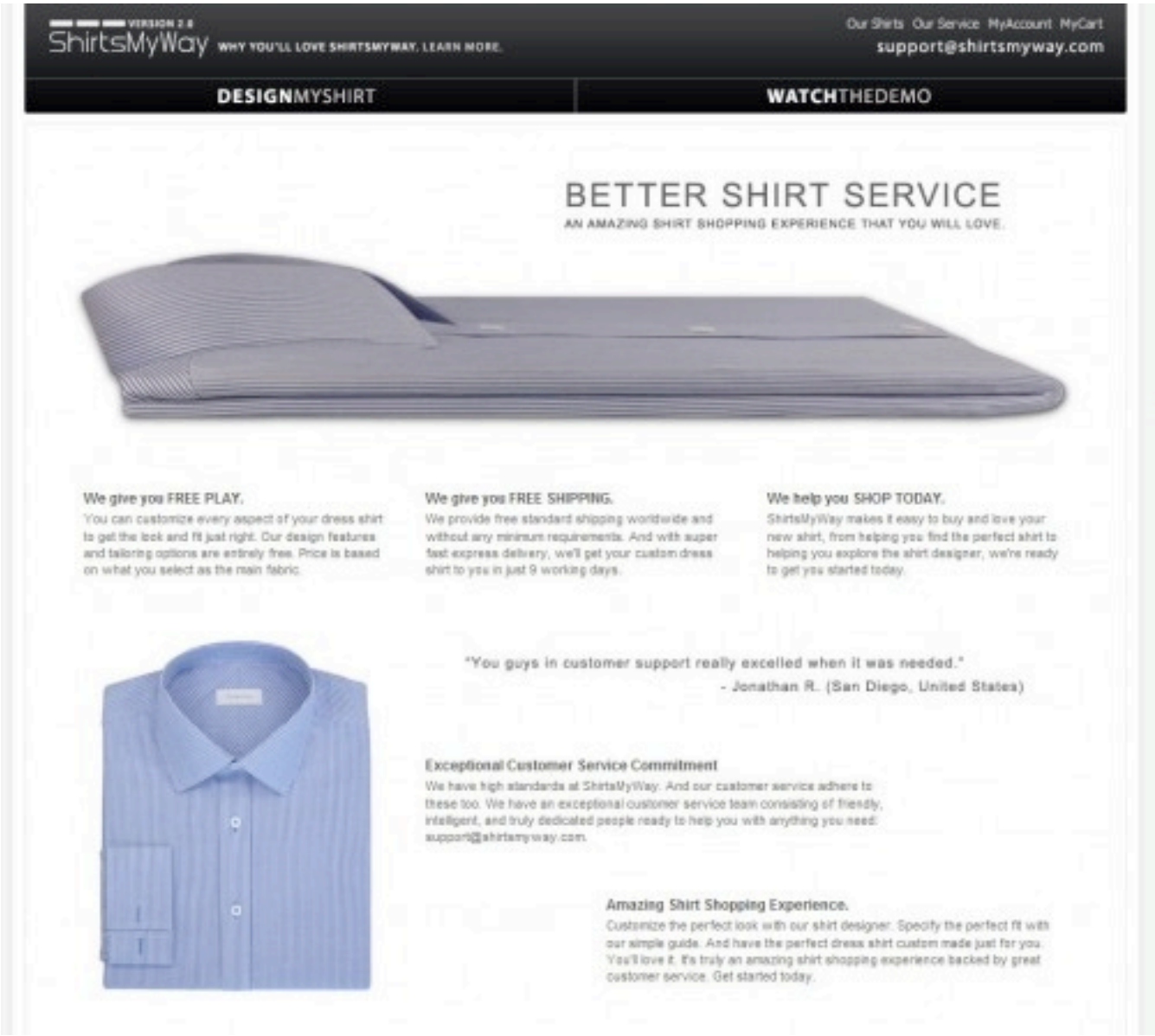
1. **The action shot** – the product is seen together with other products, in a different angle, or in use.
2. **The overall shot** – the product should be seen as a whole
3. **The zoomed shot** – a photo showing the intricate details of the product

If you decide to lower the quality standard in order to add more photos it may hurt the professional image you have been trying so hard to achieve. So, more photos are not always a good thing when quality is sacrificed. Be strict on your standards when selecting your photos, these photos are the only way your customer will be seeing your product and you want that impression to be good!

If you reach the photography level that the following e-commerce sites have achieved you should be well on your way to a successful re-design.

ShirtsMyWay.com




VERSION 2.0
ShirtsMyWay
WHY YOU'LL LOVE SHIRTSMYWAY. LEARN MORE.
Our Shirts Our Service MyAccount MyCart
support@shirtsmyway.com
DESIGNMYSHIRT
WATCHTHEDEMO
BETTER SHIRT SERVICE
AN AMAZING SHIRT SHOPPING EXPERIENCE THAT YOU WILL LOVE.
We give you FREE PLAY.
You can customize every aspect of your dress shirt to get the look and fit just right. Our design features and tailoring options are entirely free. Price is based on what you select as the main fabric.
We give you FREE SHIPPING.
We provide free standard shipping worldwide and without any minimum requirements. And with super fast express delivery, we'll get your custom dress shirt to you in just 9 working days.
We help you SHOP TODAY.
ShirtsMyWay makes it easy to buy and love your new shirt, from helping you find the perfect shirt to helping you explore the shirt designer, we're ready to get you started today.
"You guys in customer support really excelled when it was needed."
- Jonathan R. (San Diego, United States)
Exceptional Customer Service Commitment
We have high standards at ShirtsMyWay. And our customer service adhere to these too. We have an exceptional customer service team consisting of friendly, intelligent, and truly dedicated people ready to help you with anything you need: support@shirtsmyway.com.
Amazing Shirt Shopping Experience.
Customize the perfect look with our shirt designer. Specify the perfect fit with our simple guide. And have the perfect dress shirt custom made just for you. You'll love it. It's truly an amazing shirt shopping experience backed by great customer service. Get started today.

www.shirtsmyway.com

Berries.com

www.berries.com

Layout

In most cases, the easier it is for the visitor to do what they want on the site, the higher the conversion rate will be. Do not try to reinvent the wheel when it comes to the layout.

The layout will highly depend on what you are selling.

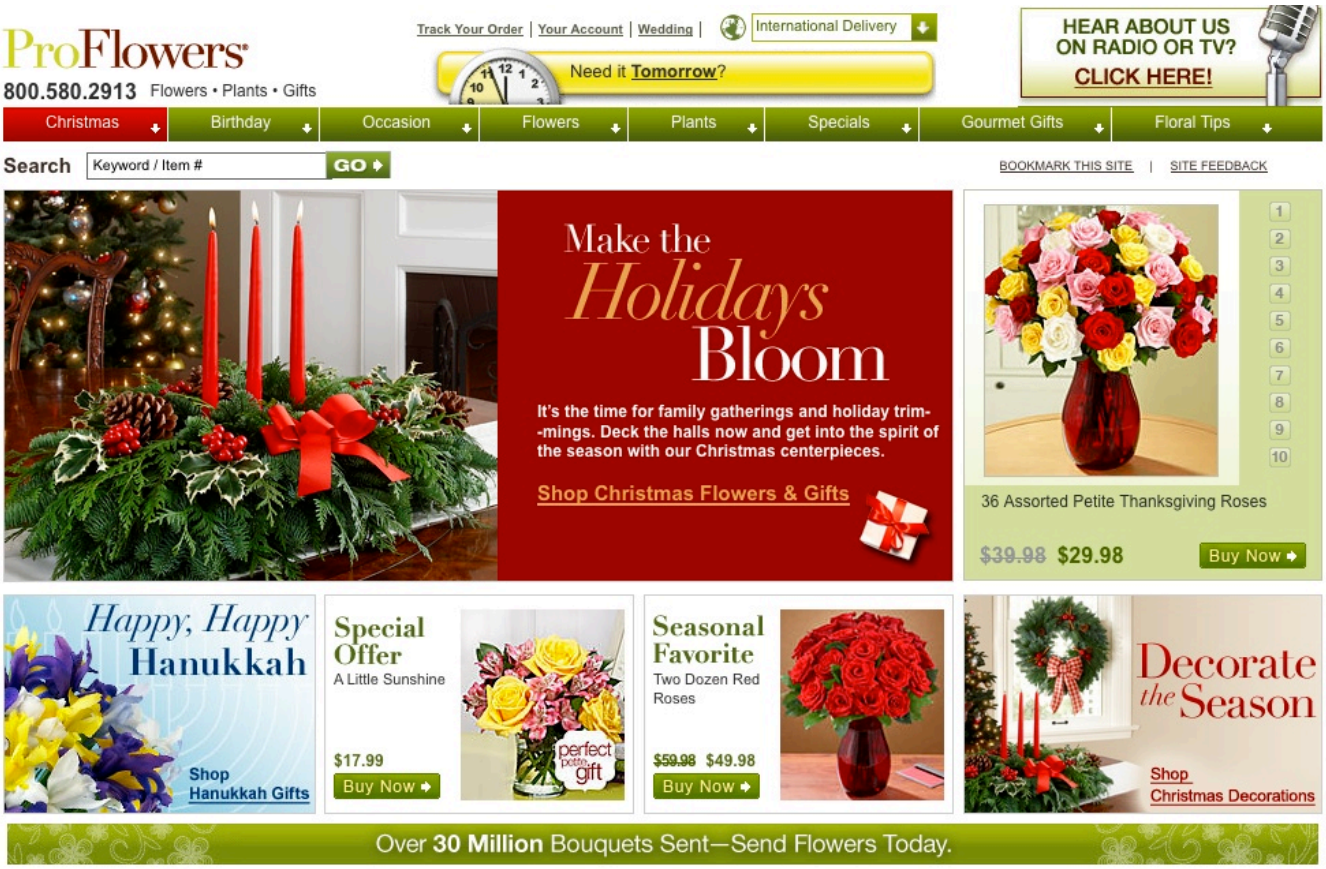
Here is what to think of for your new layout:

1. **Keep it simple:** Eliminate unnecessary clicks or functions on your site. This is easier said then done. Often first marketers/designers want to make something that can do more than any competitor out there, yet all you need to be is two steps ahead of the competitor in the most important areas to significantly outperform them. Outperforming your competitor means that more of your SEO traffic will convert better especially for large keywords.
2. **Horizontal navigation:** If you have vertical navigation on your site now, try using horizontal navigation for your re-design. Heat maps have shown that it's quite common that store users skip vertical bars of information that is not in the center of the screen. If you really need it try using vertical hover over drop down menus instead.
3. **Email opt in:** Many e-commerce stores don't realize that a frightening percentage of visitors to your site may find it great, but just aren't ready to buy and never come back. Try holding on to more of these potential buyers by encouraging them to give you their email. Try using methods such as save 10% on your next order or offering them free information. This way there is a better chance that they'll remember your shop when they are ready to buy.
4. **Your layout shouldn't clash with your product photography:** As mentioned before it's important your photos and layout don't clash.

It's always helpful to look at the layouts of some of the best performing sites on the net. Do note that the conversion rates you are about to see are very rare and are only achieved in certain markets usually with substantial financial backing. Certain top converting websites have been excluded due to their particularly strong brand which will have an enormous effect on conversion rates.

Proflowers

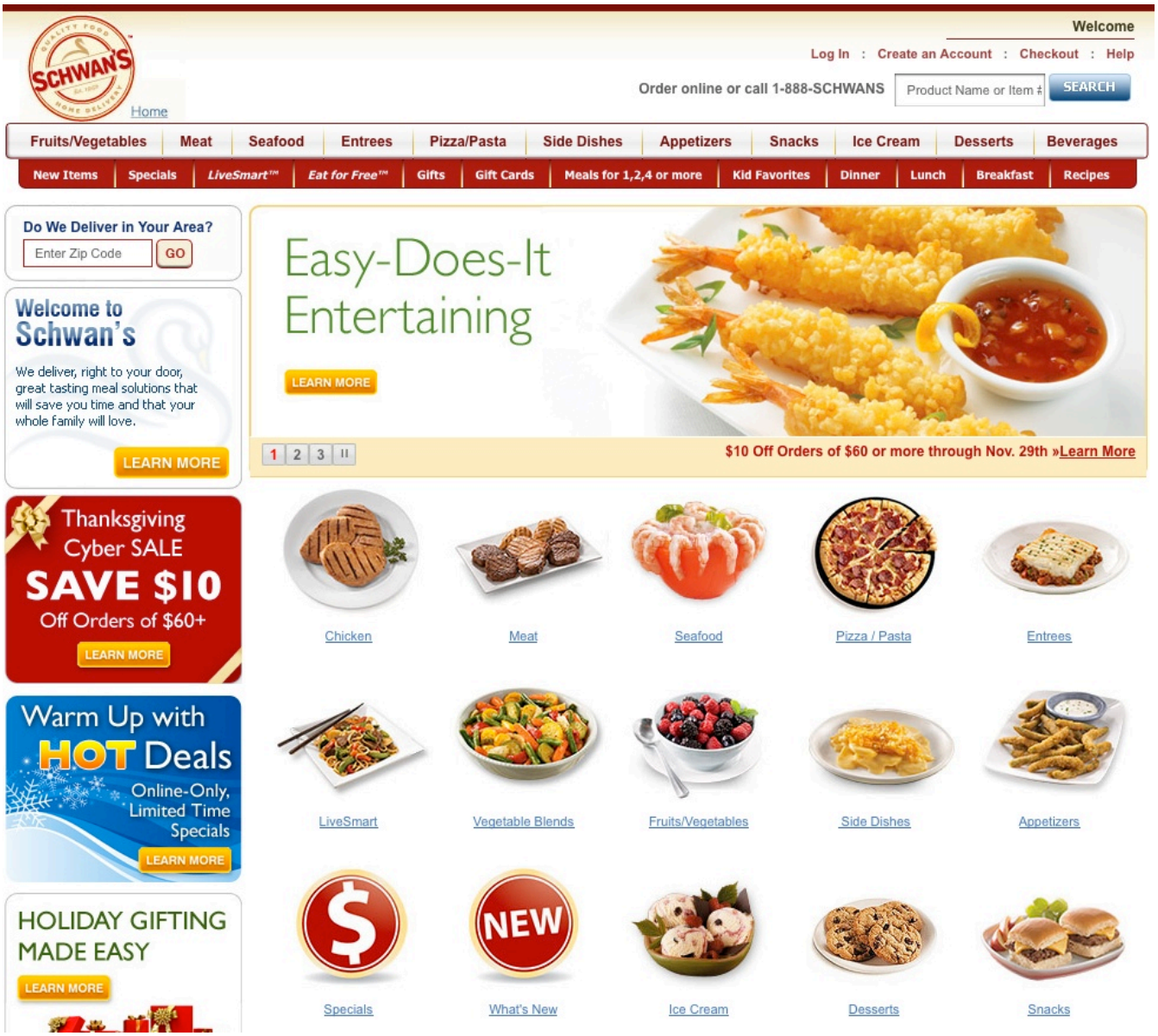
Although flowers are a hot selling product and have a lot of spontaneous purchases, Proflowers does a great job with their simple layout while still offering a large selection of flowers. They have an impressive 24.4% conversion rate and run ongoing conversion tests.



www.proflowers.com

Schwans

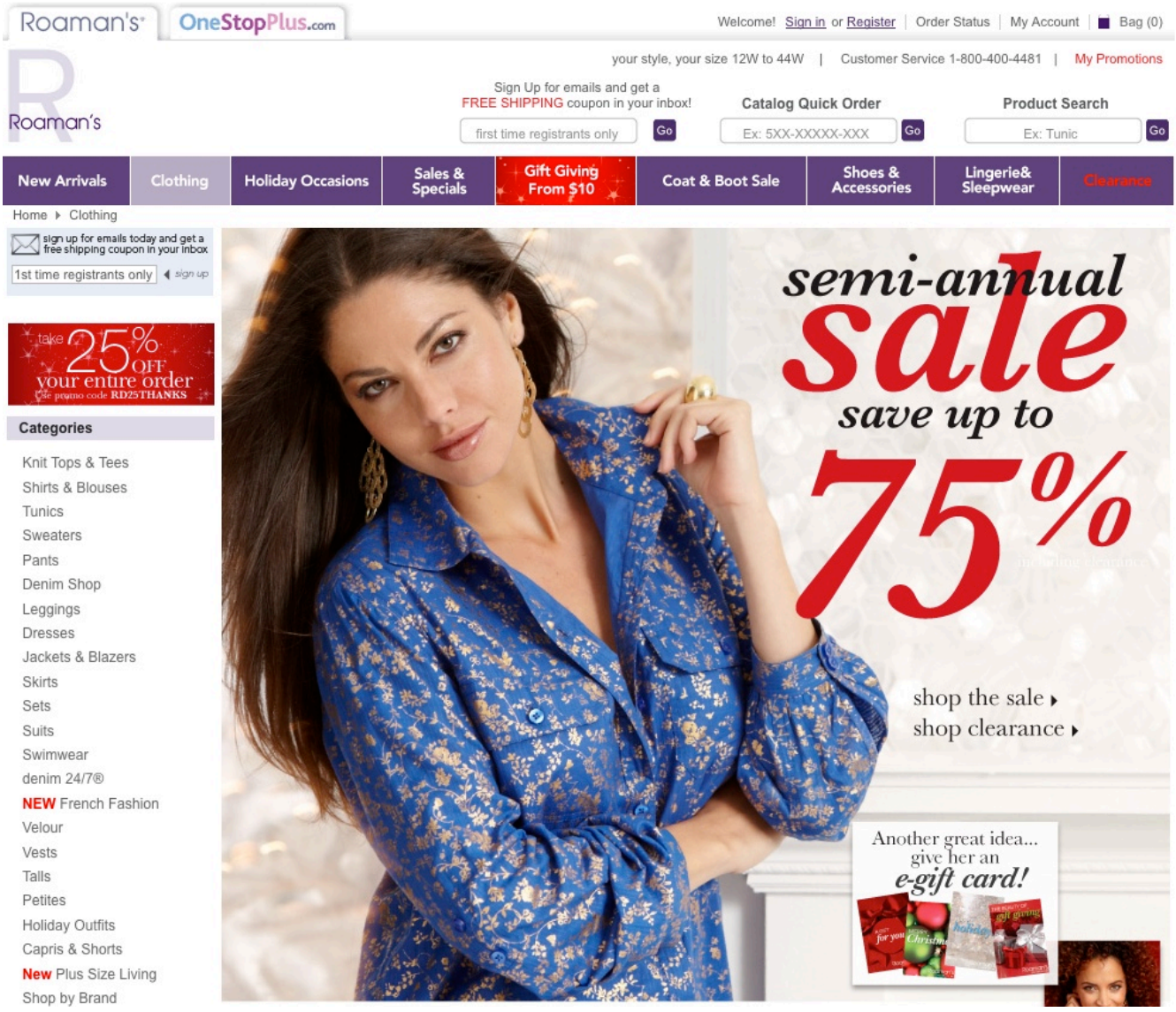
Schwan is quite famous for their insane 45% conversion rate. A good brand, simple and great looking product photos, and a site that is easy to navigate are among their biggest strengths.



www.schwans.com

Roamans

Big and clear photos right on their home page with space for text that emphasizes an offer or message together with their simple horizontal navigation menu goes a long way. They hit an overall 18.4% conversion rate.



www.roamans.com

Most of the examples above mainly deploy horizontal navigational menus and large areas below displaying their product photography and offers, this leads to a clean look that is easy to navigate. The above conversion rates are sourced from Marketingcharts.com and I-newswire.com.

Improve Your E-Commerce Design With Brilliant Product Photos

By Peter Crawfurd

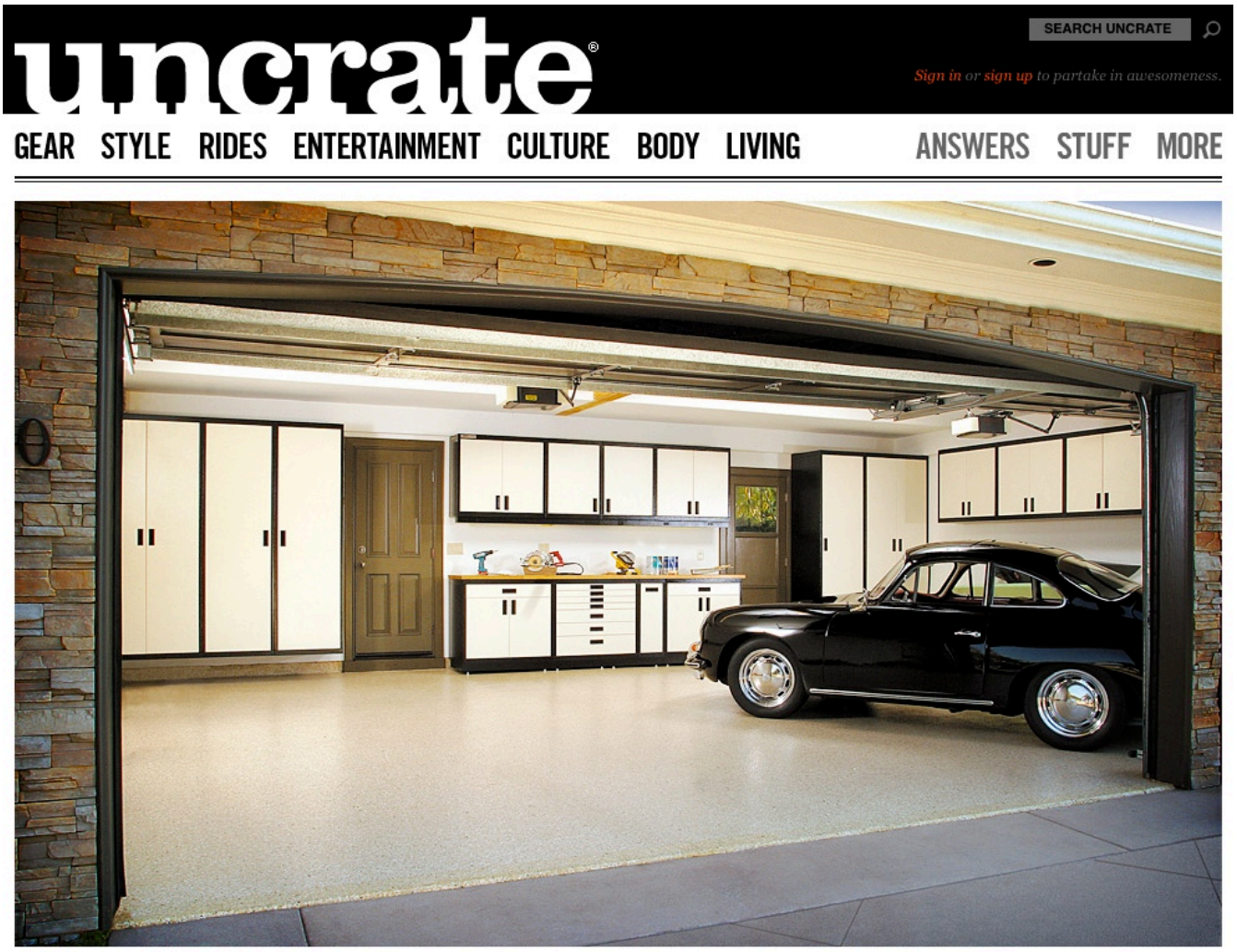
Product photography could well be the single most important design aspect of any e-commerce website. Without the ability to touch, hold, smell, taste or otherwise handle the products they are interested in, potential customers have only images to interact with. Ultimately, the softer, tastier, flashier and more attractive your products look to shoppers, the more confident they'll feel about purchasing from you and the better your conversion rate will be.

While any product can look great in a photo (sometimes deceptively so), keep in mind that your images should match your website's overall aesthetic and your company's image. Let's start with a few great examples of how online retailers have incorporated high-quality product photos onto their websites. In this article, we will focus on images of actual items, rather than models, events or landscapes.

Examples Of Beautiful Product Photography

Uncrate

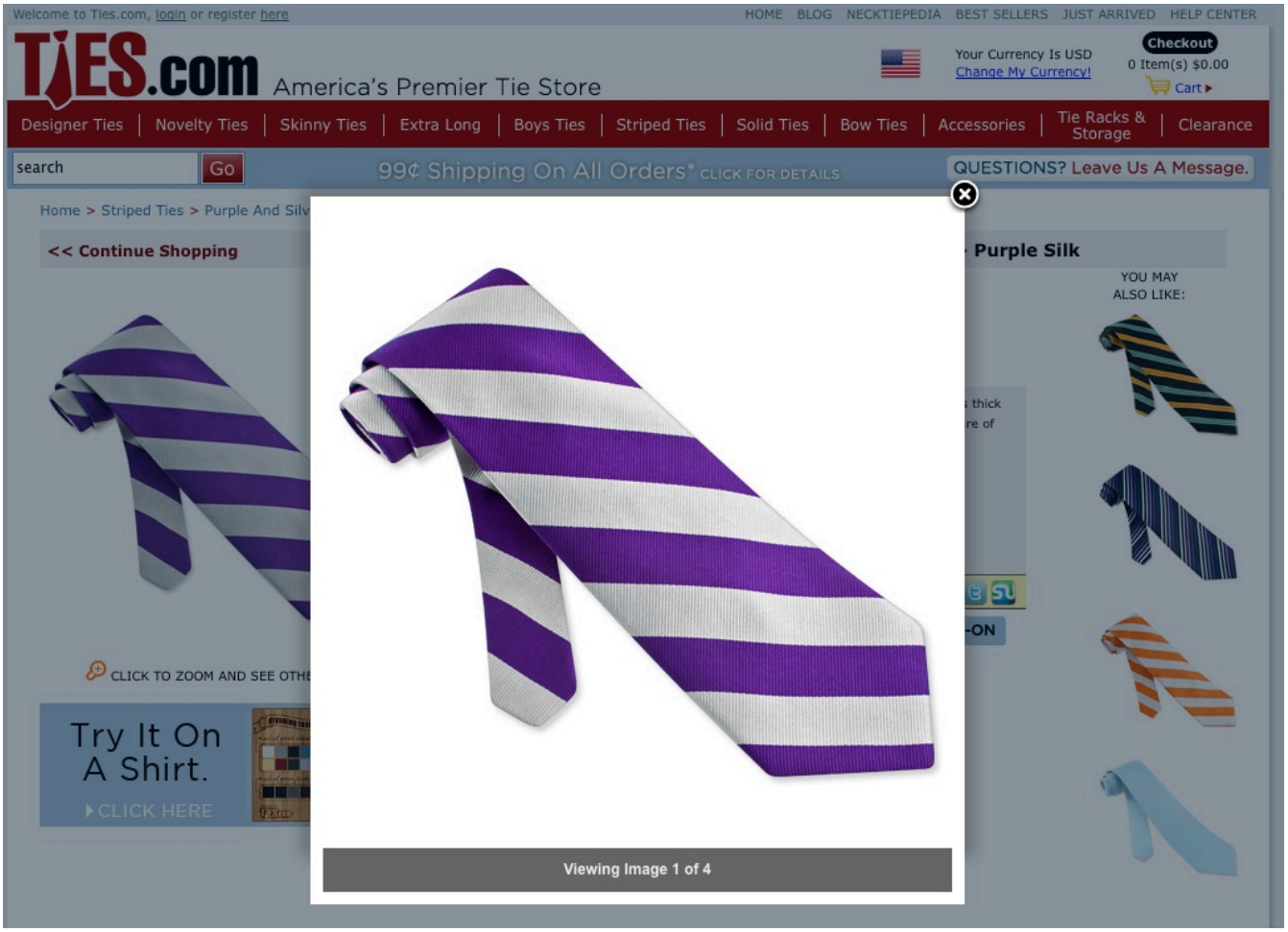
Uncrate is probably the best-looking men's shopping blog, and a lot of the credit goes to the product photos in its posts. One of the criteria for its blog posts seems to be for product photos to be incredibly well shot. This is a great place to get inspired for your own product photography project.


uncrate
SEARCH UNCRATE
Sign in or sign up to partake in awesomeness.
GEAR STYLE RIDES ENTERTAINMENT CULTURE BODY LIVING
ANSWERS STUFF MORE

www.uncrate.com

Ties.com

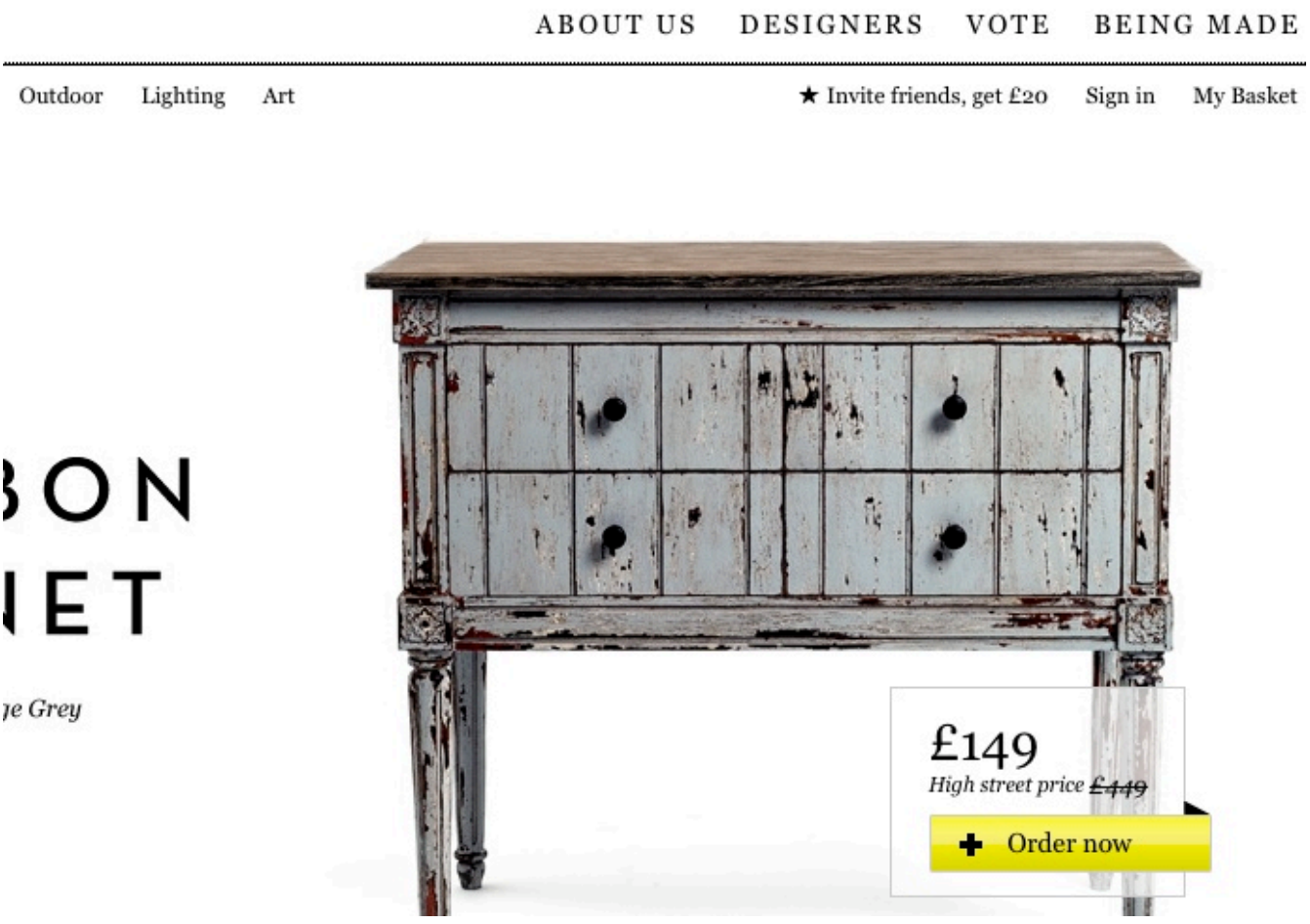
Ties.com has years of experience with dress-tie photography and has improved the quality of its photos over the years. Now it uses a light-box effect to offer close-ups of its ties. The layout of the website is similar to that of Amazon. As with any website of this nature, super-clear photos are essential to compensate for the customer's inability to feel the ties.


Welcome to Ties.com, login or register here
HOME BLOG NECKTIEPEDIA BEST SELLERS JUST ARRIVED HELP CENTER
TIES.com America's Premier Tie Store
Your Currency Is USD
Change My Currency!
Checkout
0 Item(s) $0.00
Cart
Designer Ties | Novelty Ties | Skinny Ties | Extra Long | Boys Ties | Striped Ties | Solid Ties | Bow Ties | Accessories | Tie Racks & Storage | Clearance
search
Go
99¢ Shipping On All Orders* CLICK FOR DETAILS
QUESTIONS? Leave Us A Message.
Home > Striped Ties > Purple And Silv
<< Continue Shopping
Purple Silk
YOU MAY ALSO LIKE:
CLICK TO ZOOM AND SEE OTHE
Try It On A Shirt.
CLICK HERE
Viewing Image 1 of 4

www.ties.com

Made.com

Turning to furniture, UK website *Made.com* does a great job of showing its products from multiple angles and perspectives without cluttering the website or making the images feel redundant. Its lamps, for example, can be viewed up close or at a distance within the same frame, while its tables and desks can be viewed from both eye level and low angles. Again, the selective use of color throughout the website directs attention to the products themselves, while giving the overall design a sleek minimalist feel.



www.made.com

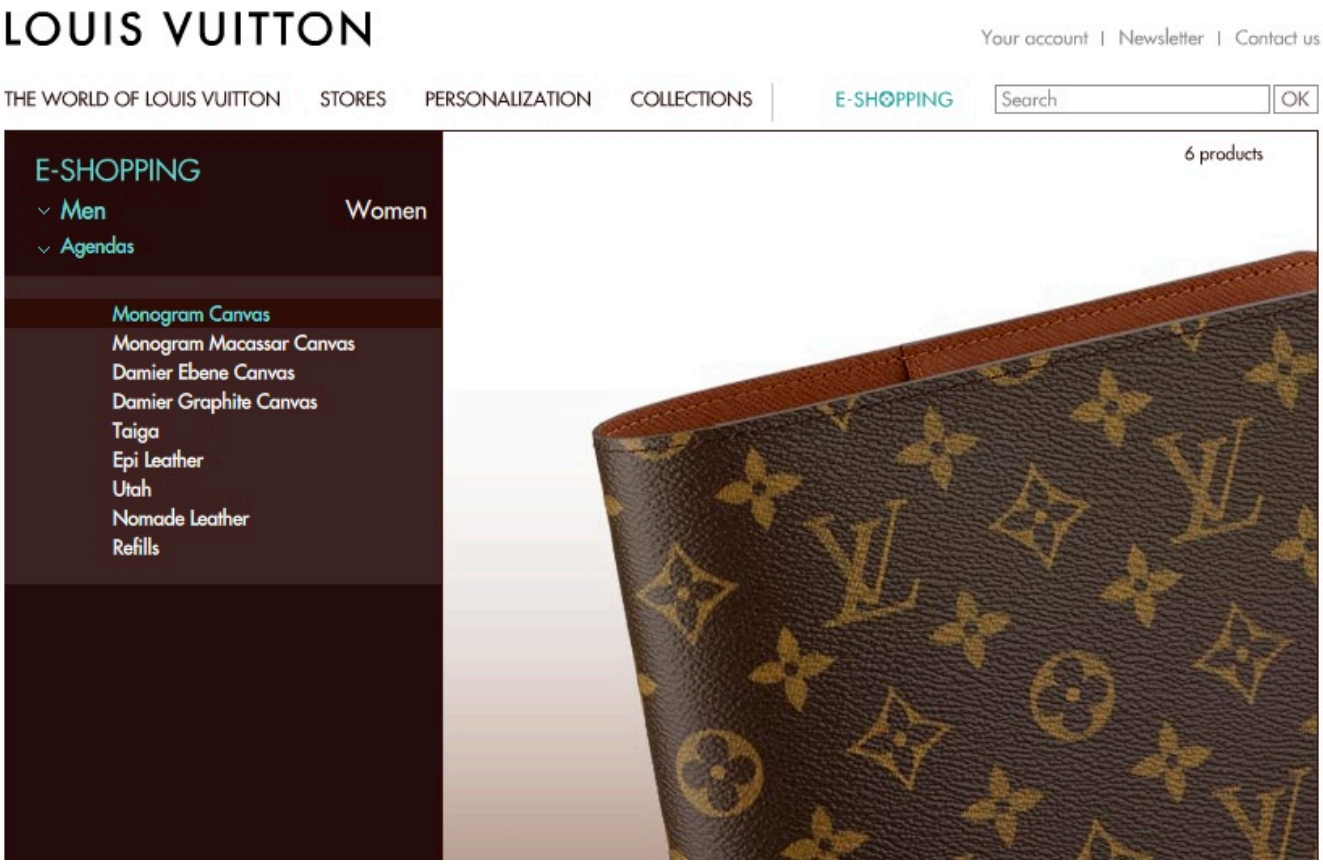
Harry Winston

High-end jewelry website Harry Winston emphasizes the brilliancy and luxury of its products by integrating them in a relatively stripped-down website. The sharp, vibrant images of colored gemstones and sparkling crystals command the viewer's attention on every page, without overpowering the other elements of the design. The brilliant reds, greens and oranges of these products contrast with the neutral black, white and gray color scheme, while complementing the refined cursive and rolling script scattered throughout the website.

www.harrywinston.com

Louis Vuitton

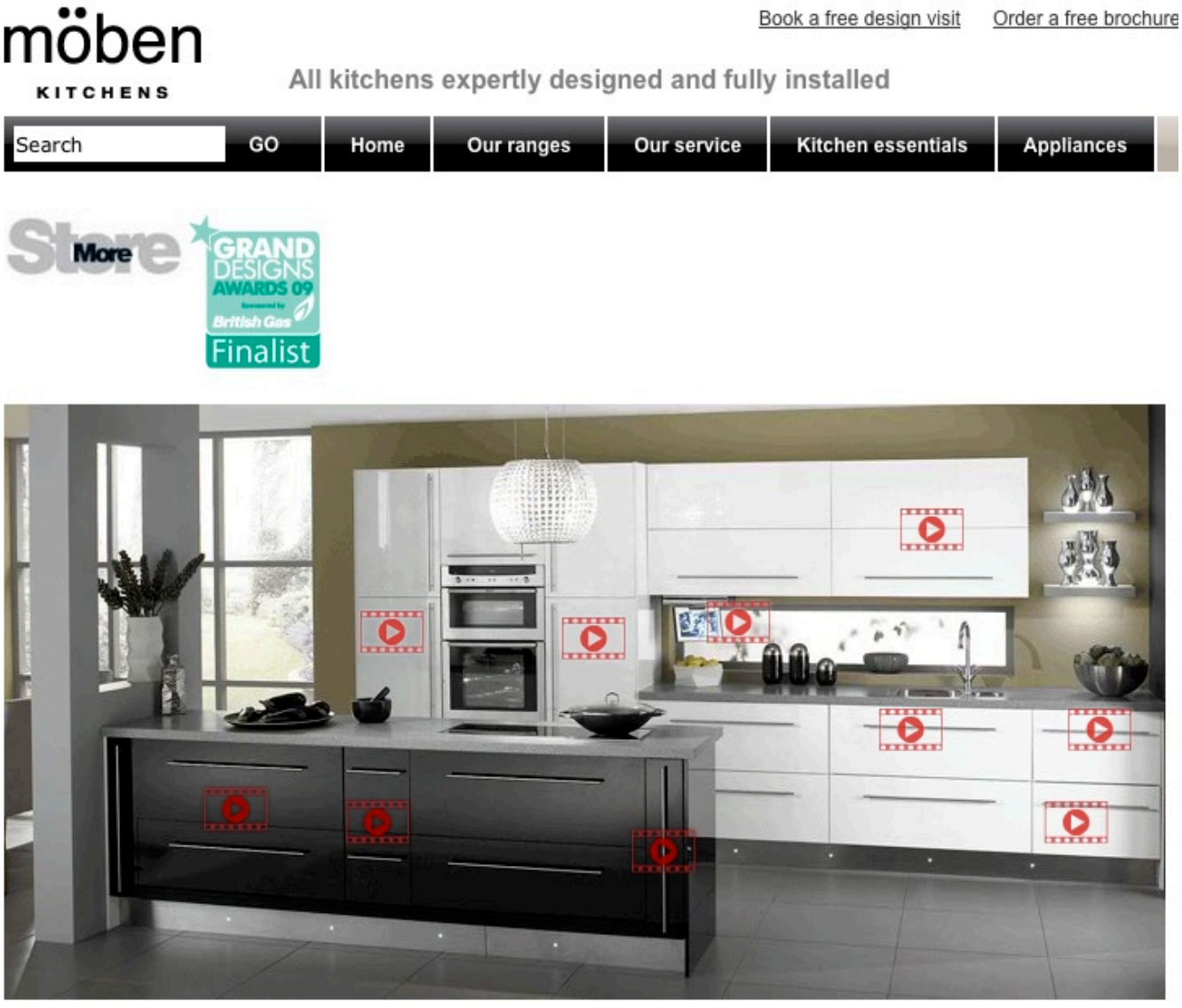
Another up-market website, Louis Vuitton also uses wonderful high-res product shots and zooms for its non-clothing items, such as calendars and wallets. While this website predictably has numerous photos of models posing with the products in lifestyle and fashion vignettes, it also does an excellent job of emphasizing the craftsmanship and quality of its items.



www.louisvuitton.com

Moben

Kitchen designer Moben has a much busier website, using pictures and videos of its products in various locations. The photos here show potential customers the innovative design and style of these products in a unified setting, while still offering detailed shots of individual items. This is a great strategy for e-commerce companies that sell large products or that sell services that are difficult to visualize.



www.moben.co.uk

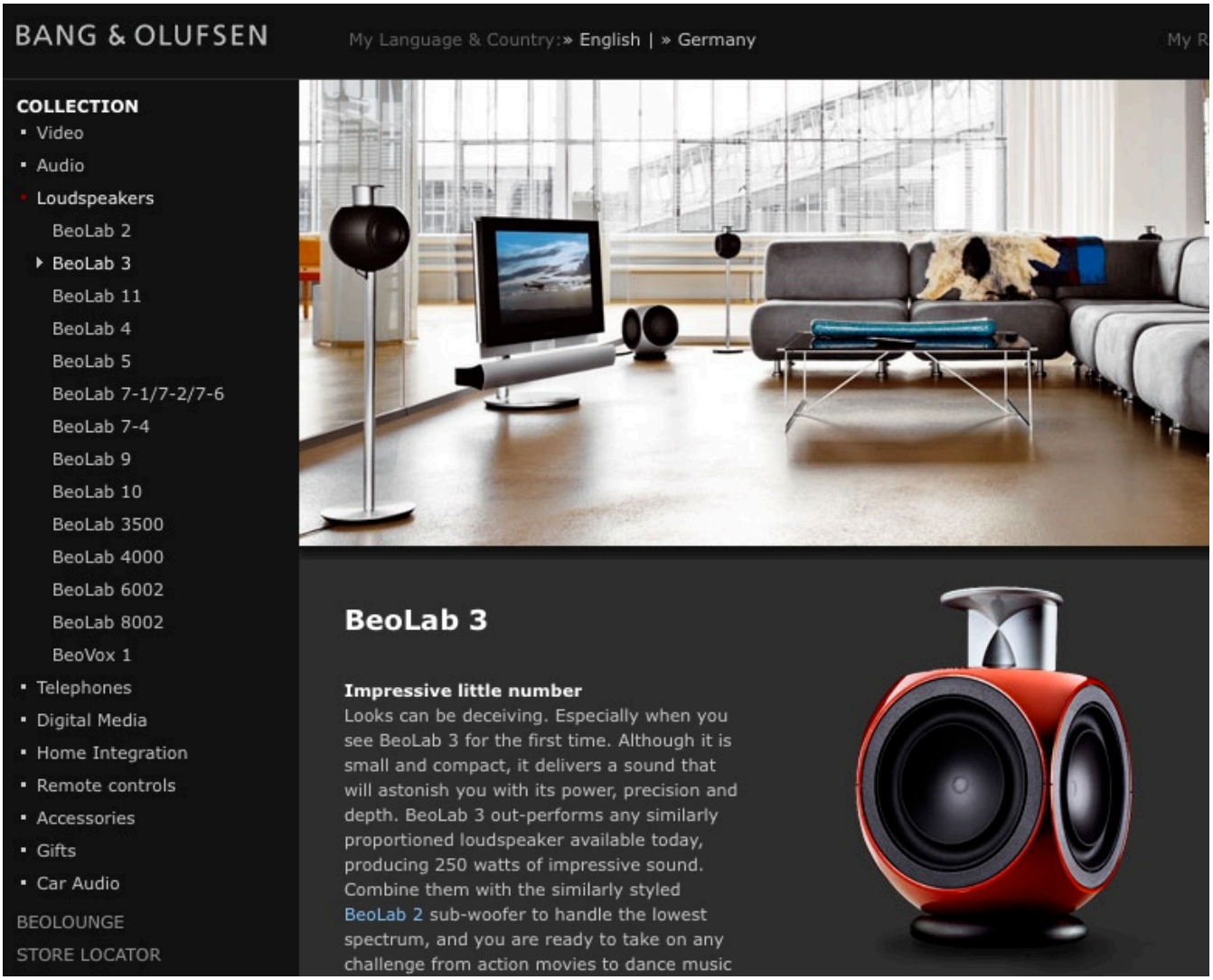
Weber

Moving out of the kitchen and into the backyard, Weber, a well-known maker of grilling and other cooking equipment, has a fine product photography area on its website. The website itself is pretty basic, as you might expect, without much in the way of attractive text or icons, but the sharp images and high-quality close-ups add a lot of visual appeal. If nothing else, this is a good example of how good images can help a website overcome a mediocre design.

www.weber.com

Bang & Olufsen

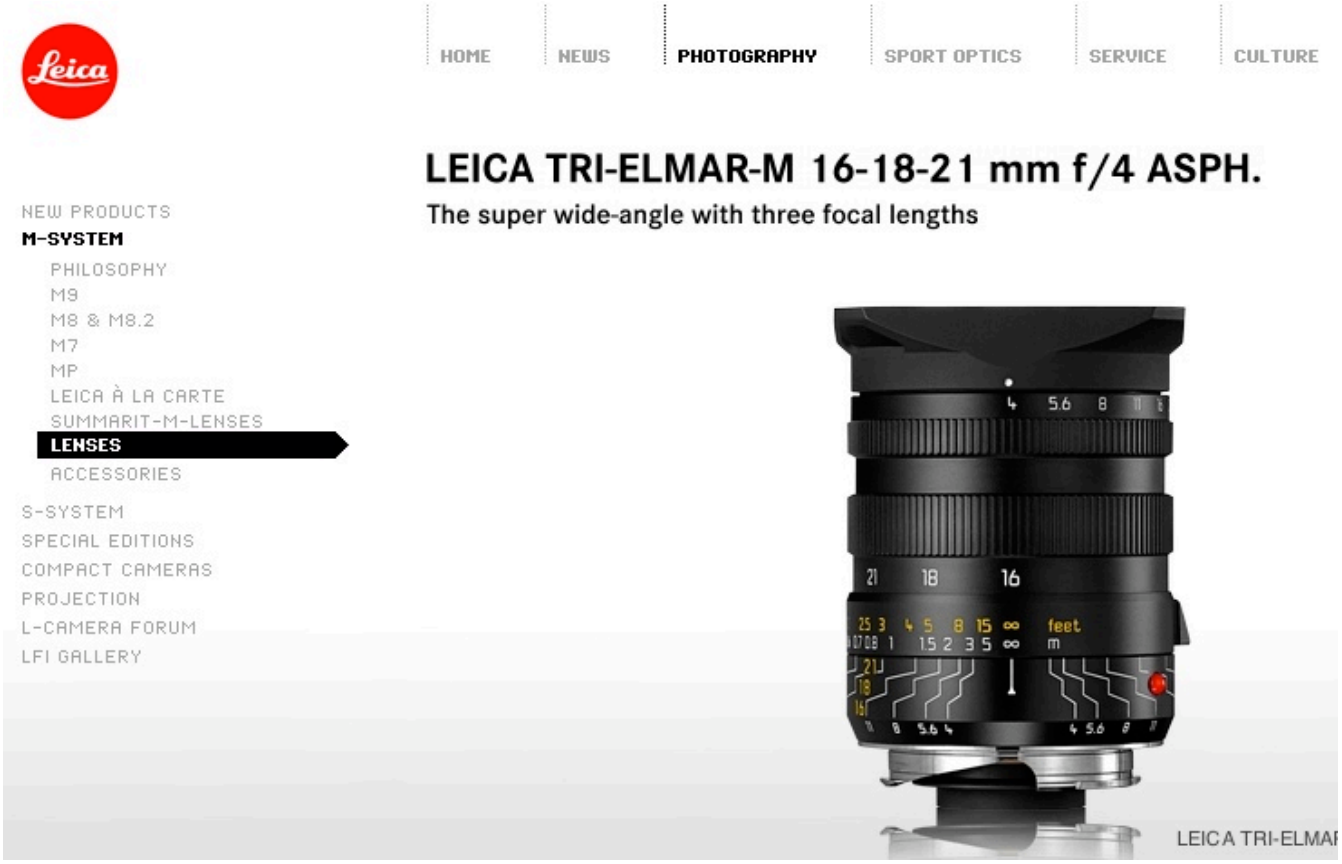
Turning to a website that at first glance seems a bit less inviting, audio-video manufacturer Bang & Olufsen opts for a harder, more architectural aesthetic than some of the other websites we've looked at. While there is plenty of black, gray and white throughout, this website is far from cold and sterile, thanks to the side-sweeping product photos, which are bright but do not compromise the futuristic feel of the design. The pages of Bang & Olufsen's collection have another nice touch: product thumbnails glow when you hover over them.


BANG & OLUFSEN
My Language & Country:» English | » Germany
COLLECTION
Video
Audio
Loudspeakers
BeoLab 2
BeoLab 3
BeoLab 11
BeoLab 4
BeoLab 5
BeoLab 7-1/7-2/7-6
BeoLab 7-4
BeoLab 9
BeoLab 10
BeoLab 3500
BeoLab 4000
BeoLab 6002
BeoLab 8002
BeoVox 1
Telephones
Digital Media
Home Integration
Remote controls
Accessories
Gifts
Car Audio
BEOLOUNGE
STORE LOCATOR
BeoLab 3
Impressive little number
Looks can be deceiving. Especially when you see BeoLab 3 for the first time. Although it is small and compact, it delivers a sound that will astonish you with its power, precision and depth. BeoLab 3 out-performs any similarly proportioned loudspeaker available today, producing 250 watts of impressive sound. Combine them with the similarly styled BeoLab 2 sub-woofer to handle the lowest spectrum, and you are ready to take on any challenge from action movies to dance music

www.bang-olufsen.com

Leica

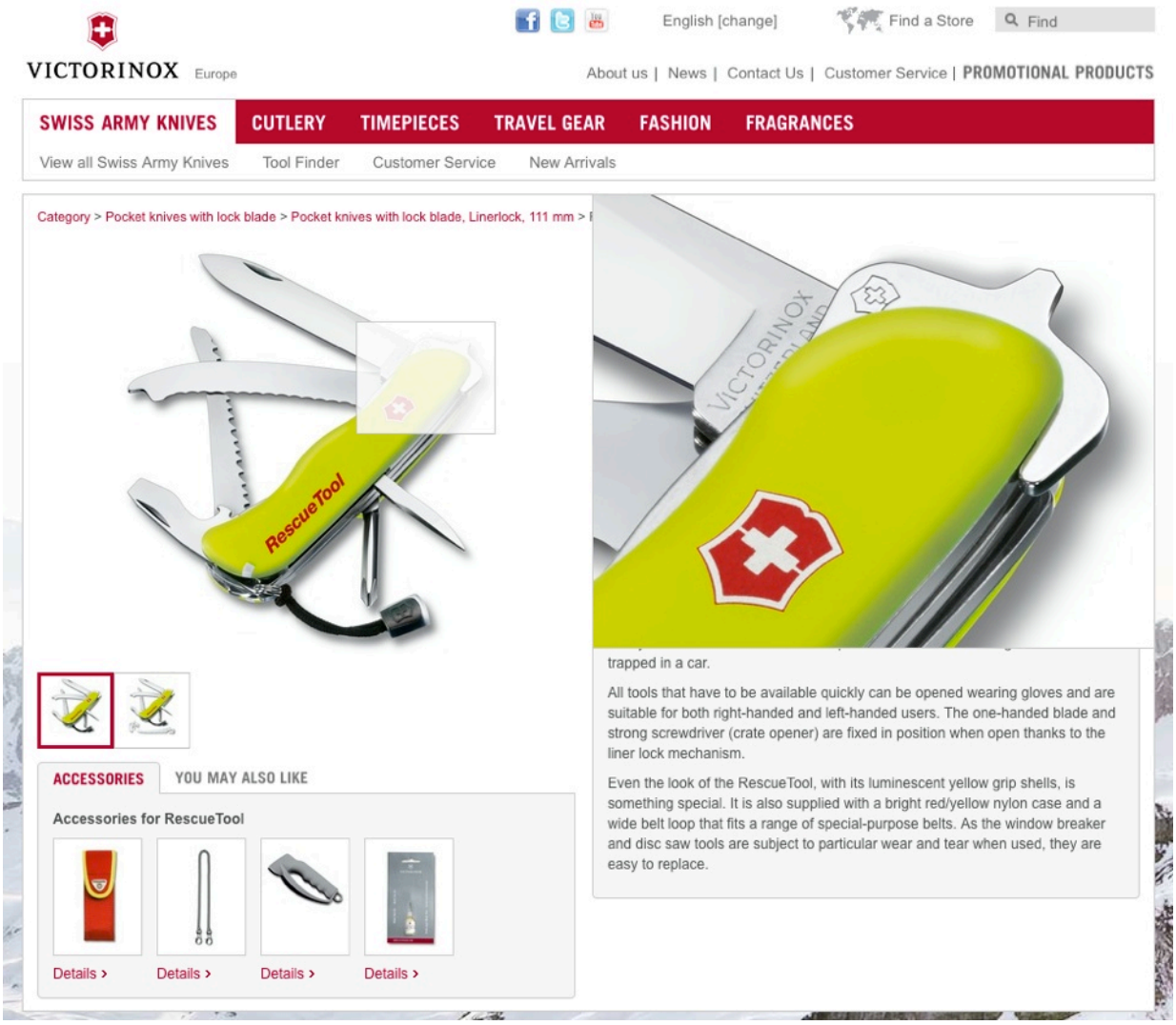
As you might expect from one of the world's biggest names in photography and imaging technology, Leica has some high-quality images, especially of its camera equipment. You won't find a ton of photos here, but in keeping with the brand's no-frills, no-nonsense approach, the pictures you do see are high-res and sharp, a perfect example of how to do more with less.



www.leica.com

Victorinox

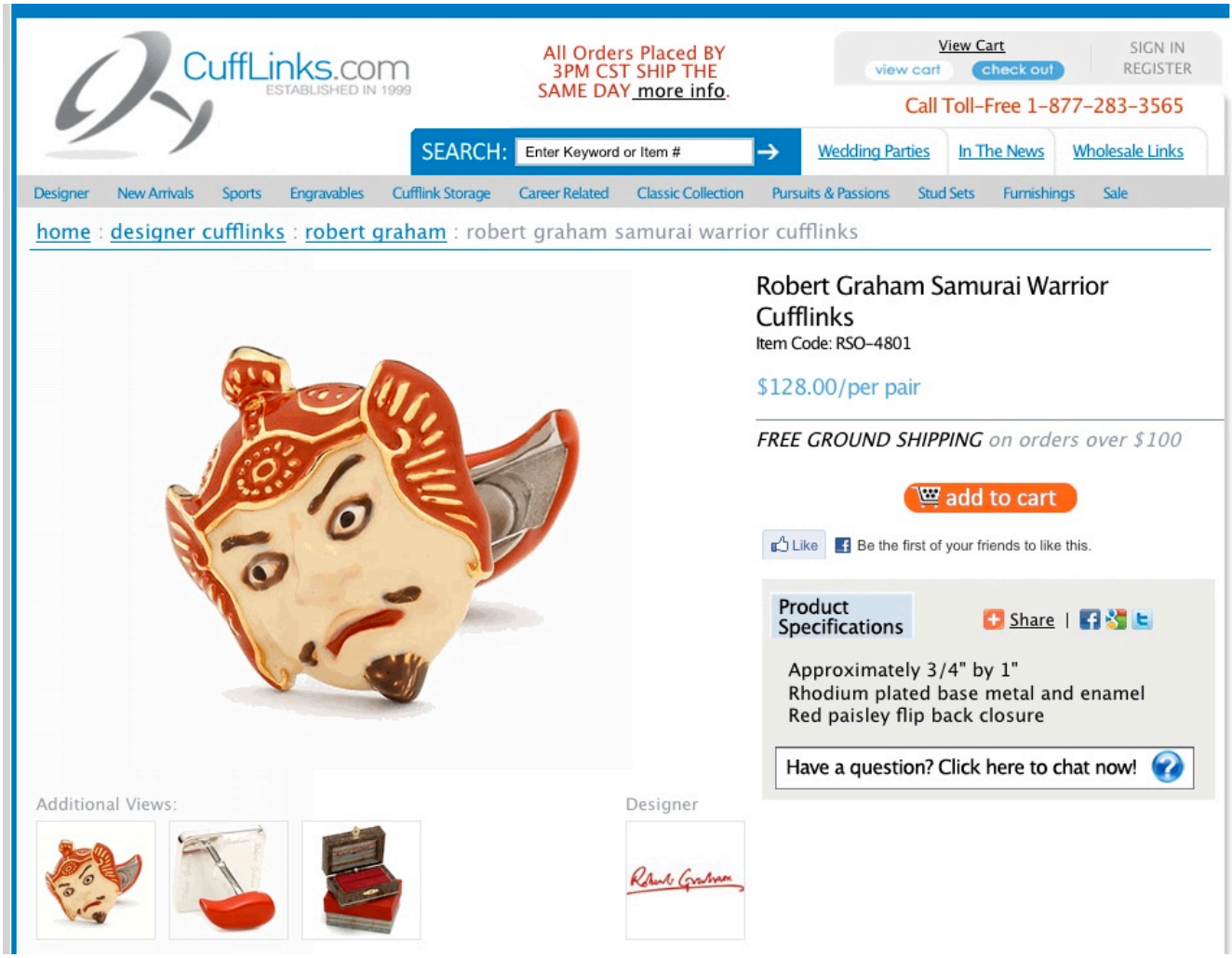
Another brand known for precision equipment, Victorinox has an impressive range of visual content on its website, especially in the product area. The sliding photo gallery in the “Timepiece” section, for example, captures both the mechanical and aesthetic beauty of the brand’s watches: you can really imagine how it would feel to hold and wear the watch, while still being able to see the complexity of its internals. The website is also notable for its great examples of selective focusing and dramatic lighting, which really make the products eye-catching.


English [change]
Find a Store
Find
VICTORINOX Europe
About us | News | Contact Us | Customer Service | PROMOTIONAL PRODUCTS
SWISS ARMY KNIVES
CUTLERY
TIMEPIECES
TRAVEL GEAR
FASHION
FRAGRANCES
View all Swiss Army Knives
Tool Finder
Customer Service
New Arrivals
Category > Pocket knives with lock blade > Pocket knives with lock blade, Linerlock, 111 mm >
RescueTool
trapped in a car.
All tools that have to be available quickly can be opened wearing gloves and are suitable for both right-handed and left-handed users. The one-handed blade and strong screwdriver (crate opener) are fixed in position when open thanks to the liner lock mechanism.
Even the look of the RescueTool, with its luminescent yellow grip shells, is something special. It is also supplied with a bright red/yellow nylon case and a wide belt loop that fits a range of special-purpose belts. As the window breaker and disc saw tools are subject to particular wear and tear when used, they are easy to replace.
ACCESSORIES
YOU MAY ALSO LIKE
Accessories for RescueTool
Details ›
Details ›
Details ›
Details ›

www.victorinox.com

CuffLinks.com

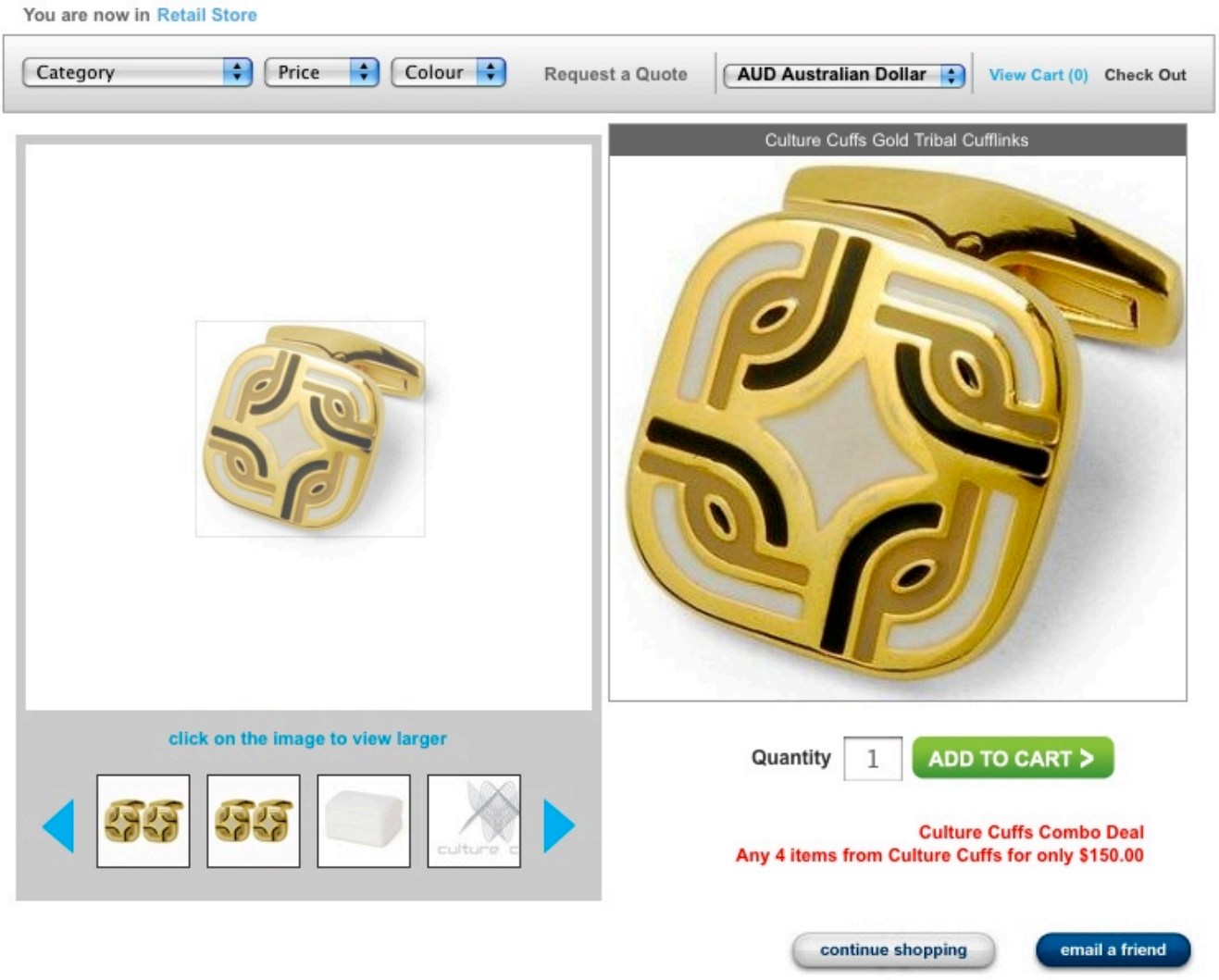
CuffLinks.com clearly puts effort into photographing its vast selection of cufflinks. It offers customers a good view of its cufflinks from all angles. It also shows the packaging or box that the cufflinks will ship in, giving us a well-rounded impression. Fortunately for this company, the size and inflexibility of cuff links make them a relatively easy product to photograph. Take a look at their many other products and the different angles the shots have been taken from.



www.cufflinks.com

Ties ’n’ Cuffs

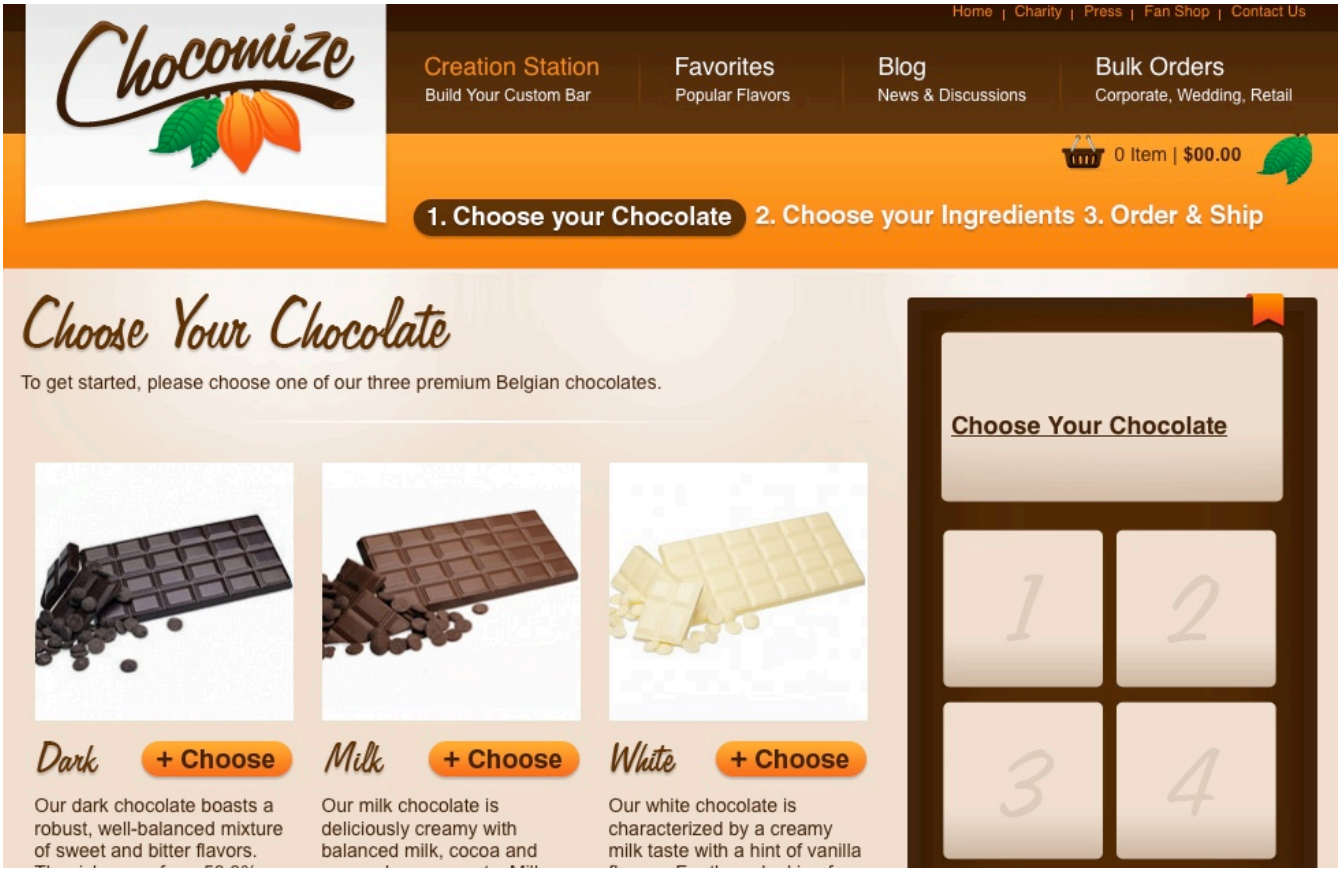
Ties ’n’ Cuffs is another e-commerce store with a large selection of cufflinks, ties and other accessories. Like CuffLinks.com, it offers a handful of photos for each product. But Ties ’n’ Cuffs lets customers also zoom into its cufflinks, giving a super-clear picture of product details that one might miss in a wide shot and showing how the crystals reflect the light. Browse around this website to see how they’ve implemented their zoom function for many different products.



www.tiesncuffs.com.au

Chocomize

Chocomize lets chocolate lovers make their own custom chocolate bars by allowing them to select from a variety of ingredients. Here is a great example of using photos for products that offer a high degree of customization, without bogging down viewers with too many choices and images. The pictures on Chocomize—bright, glossy piles of candy, nuts, berries and decorations that can be added to a milk, dark or white chocolate base—are relatively uniform in size and shape yet distinctive enough to be unique and noticeable. It also has detailed photos of each ingredient.



www.chocomize.com

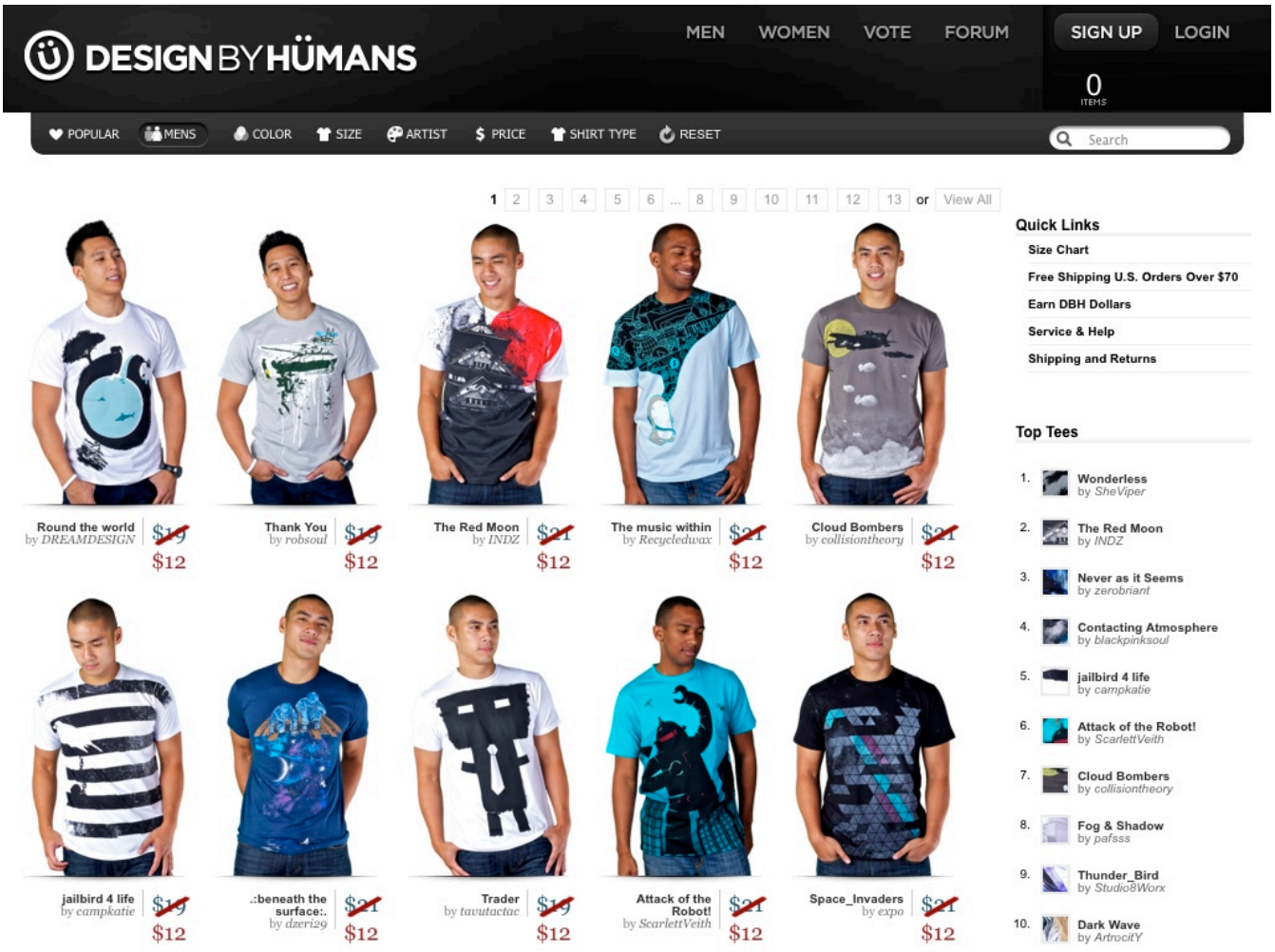
Threadless.com

The t-shirt giant Threadless.com has a particular culture, and it has done a great job of keeping that culture intact with its photos, while still keeping the product itself front and center. Check out the many creative ways that it displays its t-shirts.

www.threadless.com

Designbyhumans.com

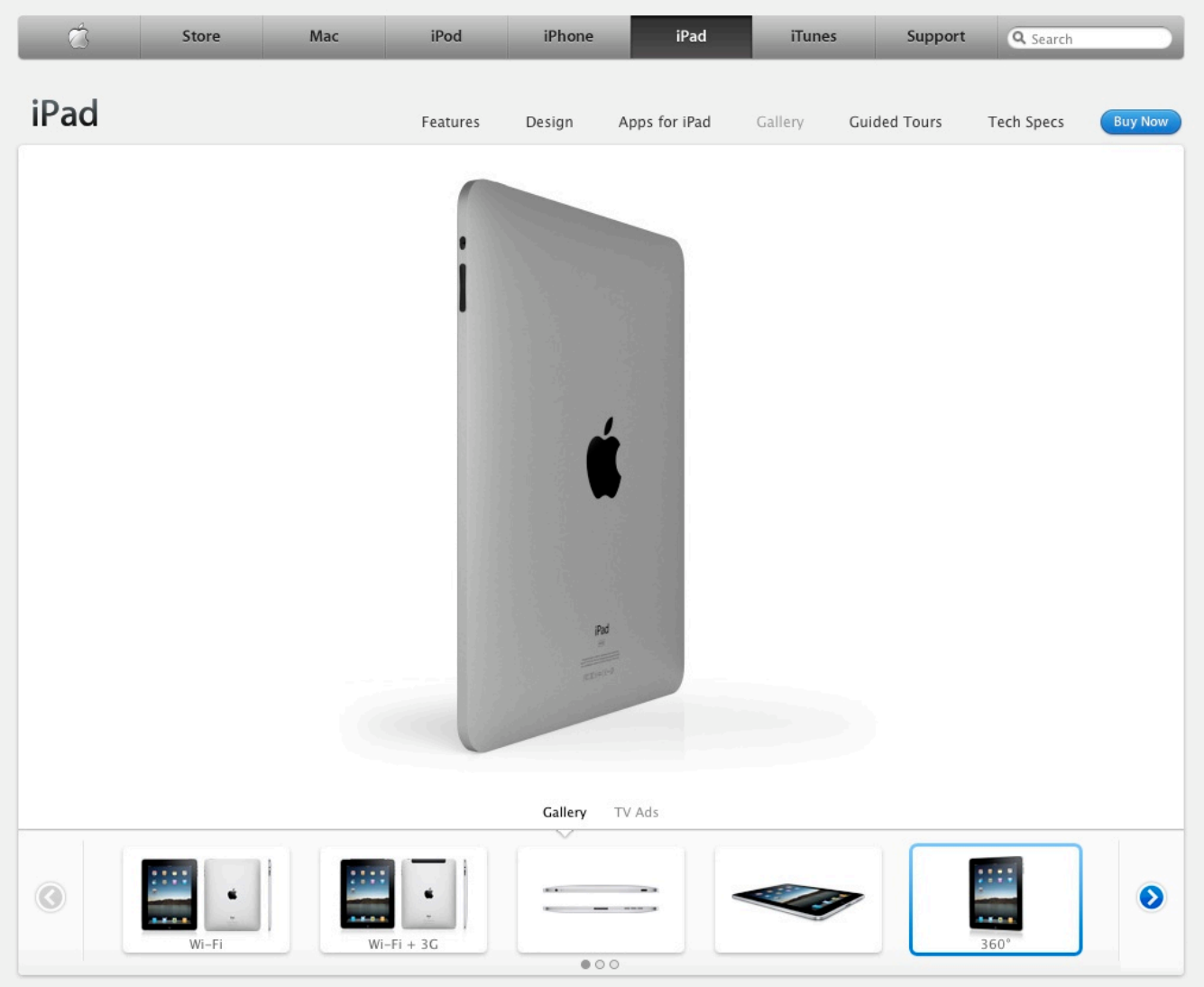
Another great t-shirt company. It has a super-clean website and keeps the product well in focus, despite the human models (which can sometimes distract from the product).



www.designbyhumans.com

Apple

While it sounds cliché, the product photos at Apple would make anyone want to purchase an iPad or iPhone. With a limited number of images and a simple twistable 360-degree viewing mode, the designers behind this website visually sum up Apple's mantra of simplicity and fun.



www.apple.com

Four Steps Of Product Photography

1. Prepare Product

To take quality photographs, the complexity and time required will depend greatly on the type of product you're shooting. Some of the easiest products to photograph are solid objects such as cups and toys; you may just have to give them a good polish before shooting.

Clothing, textiles and other items that can bend, stretch and wrinkle are much harder to photograph and could require hours of ironing and arranging to get a perfect result. Details, like whether a shirt collar is straight, will determine whether the photographs look like they were shot in a serious studio or by an amateur with a point-and-shoot camera.

Whatever the product, inspect it carefully for tears, stains, chips and other imperfections before beginning.

2. Light

To get a great-looking photo, lighting is crucial. Fortunately, with many products, you don't need much equipment to get a well-lit balanced exposure. For objects the size of a digital camera or smaller, you can use an EZcube light tent with two small 30-watt bulbs on either side. For larger items, such as clothing, two 60-watt soft boxes on either side of the product should suffice. Also consider using a light reflector to get rid of any shadows and obvious highlights.

3. Set Your Camera

Watch out for noticeable light reflections on shiny surfaces. Even though most product photos look very staged, you don't want yours to look too artificial.

Obviously, you'll need a camera to take pictures, so make sure you have one. It doesn't have to be the best or most expensive on the market, but it should at least have manual focus and shutter and aperture controls. These are all standard on most SLR cameras.

Once you've arranged the product and lighting equipment, take a few test shots until you get an exposure that isn't too bright or too dark. Keep track of the shutter speed and aperture settings of your best photos, and use them again in future to maintain consistency. If you aren't sure how things like shutter speed, aperture and lens focal length affect images, you might want to do some basic research.

If you understand the basics of photography but your photos still don't look quite right, don't worry, because you may have to change several in-camera settings before getting the kind of shots you want.

If your pictures look soft or don't enlarge well, make sure the ISO setting on your camera is as low as possible. The ISO setting affects the light sensitivity of a camera's photo sensor. By setting yours to 100 or 200, you'll get a higher-resolution shot with less grain and pixellation. While you're at it, change the camera's image size to the highest possible setting. Most cameras default to a medium-sized resolution (around 1500 x 850 pixels).

Next, make sure the white balance is set to handle the kind of light you're working in. Most cameras have modes for incandescent, fluorescent, direct sunlight and cloudy environments, and you should adjust your camera's white balance according to these different conditions. If the white balance controls are off, your images might either look too bright or have a sickly yellow cast, especially if your product is white.

Color control settings are important to consider as well. Most digital cameras allow you to select several degrees of color saturation, ranging from muted to normal to vibrant. If your product is already colorful (flowers, for example), a less saturated setting would probably work better. This is especially true with red, which many digital cameras (even high-end ones) have difficulty processing.

Finally, make sure the image format is appropriate. If you're just putting the photos online, high-resolution JPEGs are probably fine. RAW files, on the other hand, carry more data because they aren't compressed like JPEG or TIFF files, and they carry fewer digital artifacts; but they take up more space and require special codices and converters to be viewed and edited. Some cameras have a "RAW + high-res JPEG" setting, which gives you both compressed and uncompressed versions of an image. Do a little research on your camera when deciding which format to use, because some models are automatically set to give a softer focus in JPEG mode.

4. Edit the Photos

This is the final and perhaps most important step of product photography. This is when you really take your photos to the next level and make them pop. If you've gotten the lighting right and your camera properly configured, then you are well on your way to great photos. Factors such as unwanted colors and objects that couldn't be removed during the shoot, though, will require some adjustment.

Surrounding a product in white space is common practice. This makes the photo convenient to use on websites and in catalogs because it won't clash with other elements. To make a product float freely in white space, you have to remove the background with masking in your photo editing program. As common as it is, it is often done poorly, making an otherwise fine photo

look amateurish. Masking properly takes time, especially when you are not working with straight lines. Photoshop CS4 has a great “Refine edge” tool that makes it much easier to correct crooked lines.

Many people also use a variety of artistic effects in Photoshop and other bitmap editors to subtly manipulate their photos. One such effect is the soft or selective focus, which, as the name implies, softens a portion of the photo while leaving other areas sharp. This is great for creating the illusion of depth and size, and the trick is often used for pictures of food, jewelry and watches (see the examples above). Depending on your lens, you can get a similar in-camera effect by setting the aperture low and zooming in on the product from a distance.

Also, depending on the product and the look you’re aiming for, you could also experiment with the perspective controls in Photoshop. Most people assume this tool is only good for tall buildings and scenes with noticeable vanishing points, but you can also use it to make geometric objects such as tables and desks appear overpowering, especially when photographed from a low angle.

Additional Tips

Blend Photos With Design

When putting together a collection of product photos, ask yourself if the images you’re taking will match the color scheme and aesthetic of your website. The easiest way around such a challenge is to just keep things simple and minimalist.

Use a Gray Card

A gray card is a middle-gray reference that you can set your camera to for accurate and consistent color rendering, especially on older cameras that have limited controls for white balance and color. A gray card gives a more realistic depiction of your product's color and reduces the amount of post-exposure color adjustment you have to make later. They can be bought at any photography store and for about $10. Most cameras have a function for taking gray card test photos; read through the owner's manual carefully.

Get a Flexible and Sturdy Tripod

Taking sharp, consistent and professional product photos is nearly impossible without a good tripod. It can be any regular tripod, but if you are shooting a product on the floor from above, you'll probably need a horizontal extension: as the name implies, this tool extends horizontally from the head of the tripod so that you can position your camera directly above and parallel to the product itself. This prevents linear distortion, vanishing lines and uneven image depth.

The tripod you need will depend on the size of your camera. If you have a heavy-duty SLR with a long horizontal extension, you'll need a solid tripod to support the weight of the camera and prevent shaking.

If you put your tripod in storage, make sure you are able to reset it to the same height and position for your next shoot. Measure the legs of the tripod, and mark with tape where the feet of the tripod should stand on the ground.

Use Light Reflectors

As mentioned, light reflectors give photos an even spread of light and a fresh look. They come in many sizes and shapes. A medium-sized light reflector, one as big as a large pizza, should be more than enough for product photography. Anything bigger is more appropriate for videography or photographs of people.

Reflectors come with three different surfaces: silver foliated, gold foliated and white. The gold- and silver-sided reflectors usually reflect the most light, while white reflectors give a softer, warmer glow.

Define the Decision-Making Process

If your standard of quality is high or you're working on a team, the lack of a decision-making process can waste a lot of time. Set clear criteria for what you're looking for, and make sure your workflow allows all parties to follow the criteria without constant interruption.

Outsource When Appropriate

If your product is easy to shoot, then outsourcing is a great option. The most important points to discuss with the photographer beforehand are quality and their willingness and ability to contribute to the editing process.

The quality of the photos will depend on the time spent editing them. Some photographers don't want to get involved with this part, feeling that image masking and other such tedious tasks are below them. Cover all your bases before starting with the photographer, otherwise the process could turn out to be more expensive and time-consuming than you expected.

How To Use Photos To Sell More Online (Part I)

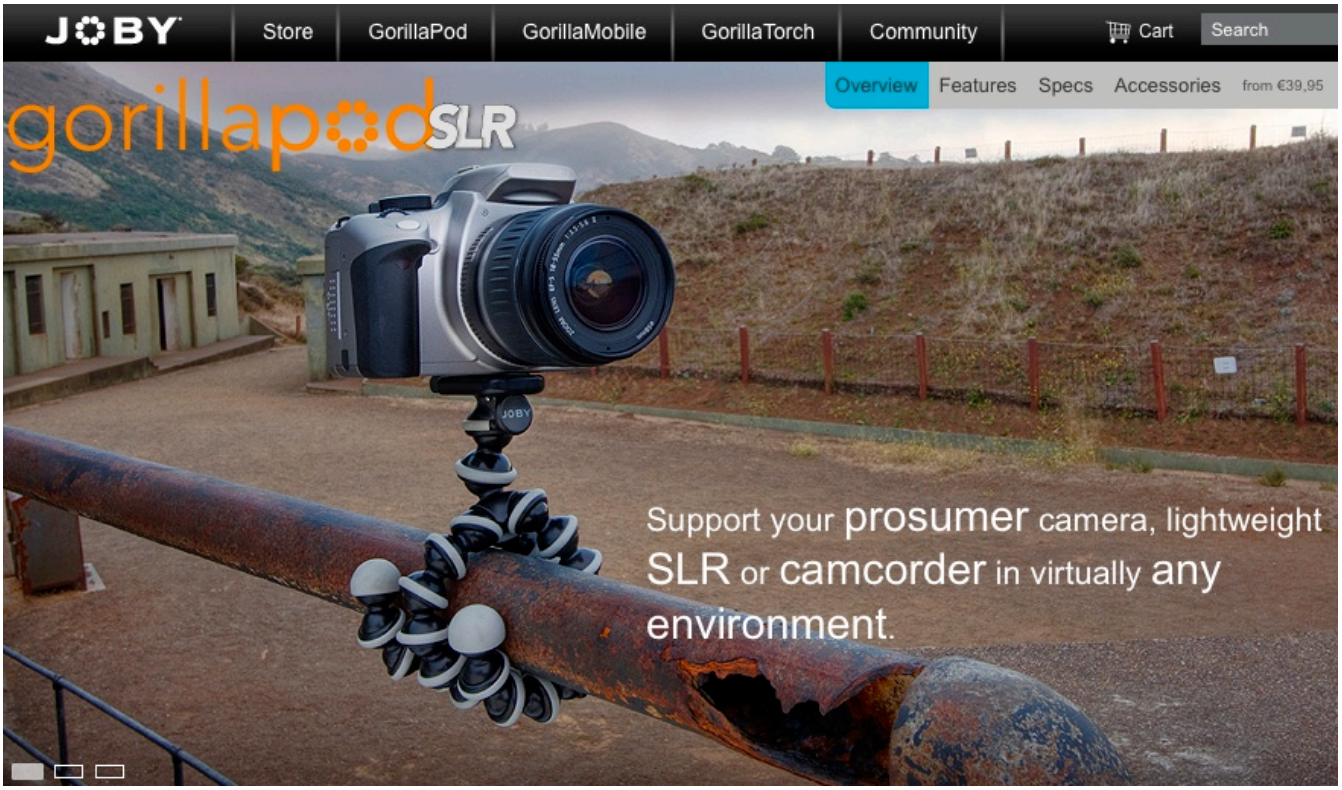
By James Chudley

As a photographer and UX designer, I pay particular attention to the effectiveness of photography when I'm testing with users. Regardless of the context, users rarely fail to comment on or be influenced by photography when shopping online.

This article pulls together principles from psychology, marketing, UX design and photographic theory. It provides a set of principles to follow when commissioning and editing photography and when planning and designing profitable e-commerce user experiences.

Show Off Product Benefits

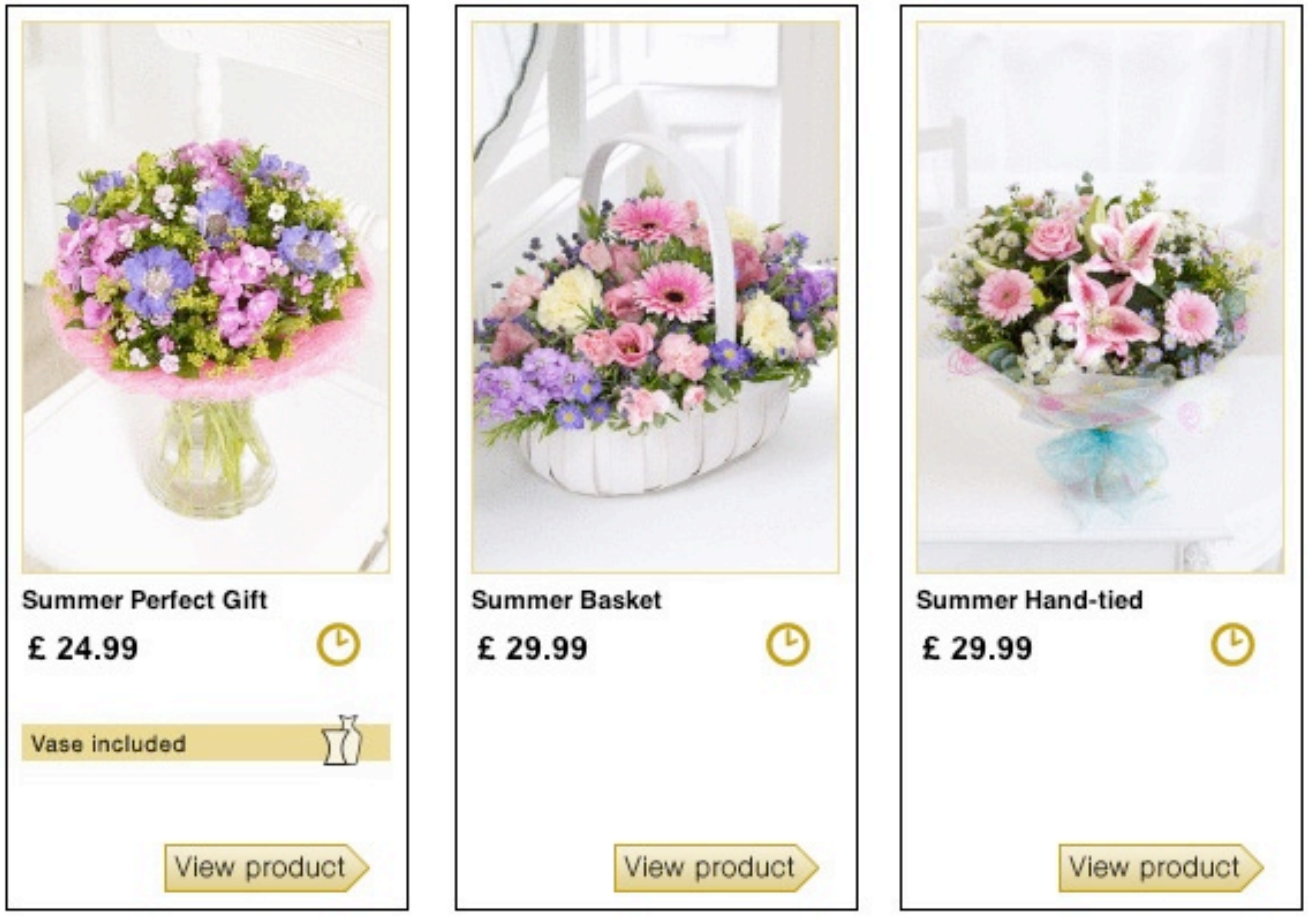
The best way to sell products is to let them sell themselves. Consider the Gorilla Pod shown below. The photo demonstrates brilliantly the benefits of the product. The copy is supplementary; the image does the heavy lifting. Let photography do the selling for you as much as possible.



joby.com/gorillapod/slr/

Don’t Give Reasons Not to Buy

One client sold flowers online, and many customers were buying flowers for hospitalized relatives. Many of the arrangements were displayed in glass vases in the photos on the website but were not actually delivered in vases. Not knowing this, many users felt that they couldn’t buy from that website, because hospitals in the UK (where the business was located) do not allow vases onto the wards.



www.eflorist.co.uk

Create an Immersive Experience

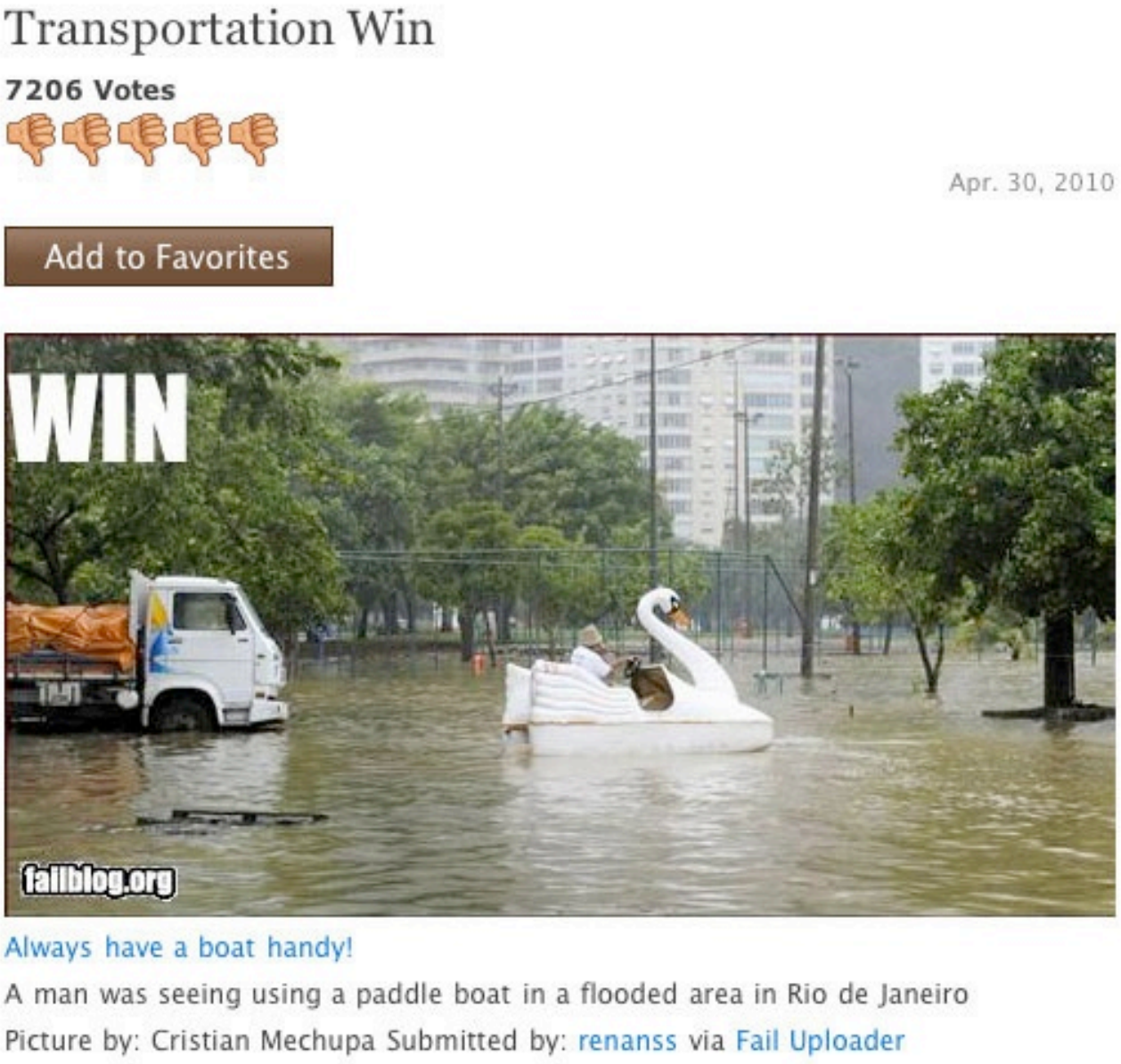
Photographs have the potential to elicit an emotional response. They can also communicate information quickly; they are easier to "read" than text. Photographs give depth and context to a story, thereby creating a more immersive experience than text can do alone. Photos can be used to inspire, enrage, inform, provoke or entertain.

Lightning streaks across the sky as lava flows from a volcano in Eyjafjallajokul April 17, 2010. (REUTERS/Lucas Jackson)
MORE PHOTOS

www.boston.com/bigpicture/

Make ‘em Laugh

Photos have the capacity to entertain as much as to inform. If it suits your brand, why not inject a bit of humor? If your website asks users to perform chores (such as doing admin tasks or paying bills), a dash of humor can ease the burden—and your customers might love it.


Transportation Win
7206 Votes
Apr. 30, 2010
Add to Favorites
WIN
failblog.org
Always have a boat handy!
A man was seeing using a paddle boat in a flooded area in Rio de Janeiro
Picture by: Cristian Mechupa Submitted by: renanss via Fail Uploader

failblog.org

Educate and Inform

"Tell me and I'll forget, but show me and I'll remember." Learning can be difficult, but supporting theory with visual stimuli can help us grasp complex concepts and confirm our understanding. Images are easy to remember; how often have you met a new person and found later that you could recall their face but not their name?

photography.nationalgeographic.com/photography/image-collection/

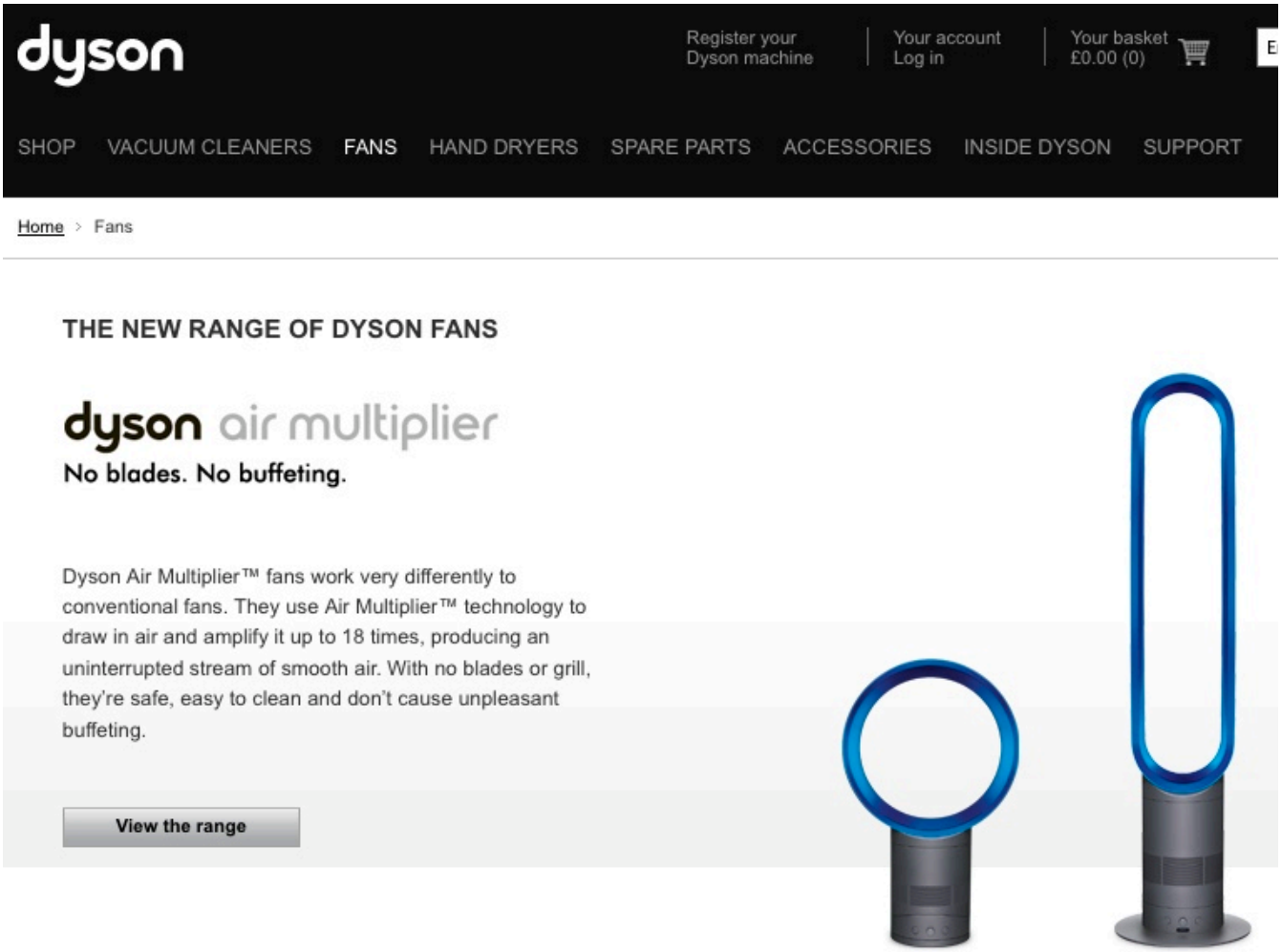
Tell a Story

From an early age we are told stories, and we spend our lives telling stories to friends and families. We know that pictures are effective storytelling tools. Even in the news media, multimedia slideshows are produced to give life to news stories.

www.nytimes.com

Highlight Innovation

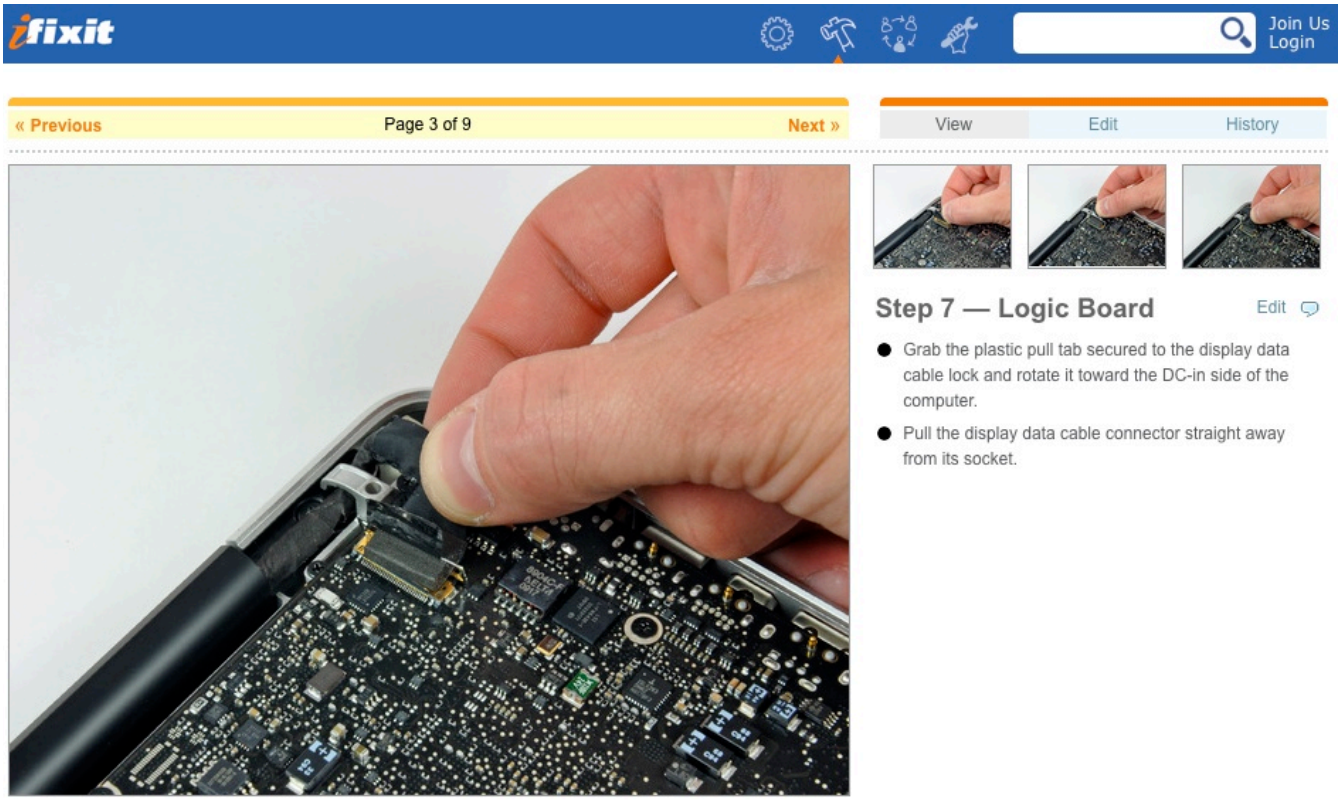
People have certain expectations of how things should look and function. If you have a product that differs from the norm, expect a large portion of interest to come from word of mouth; friends will show it to friends, who will show it to their friends, and so on.


dyson
Register your Dyson machine
Your account Log in
Your basket £0.00 (0)
SHOP
VACUUM CLEANERS
FANS
HAND DRYERS
SPARE PARTS
ACCESSORIES
INSIDE DYSON
SUPPORT
Home > Fans
THE NEW RANGE OF DYSON FANS
dyson air multiplier
No blades. No buffeting.
Dyson Air Multiplier™ fans work very differently to conventional fans. They use Air Multiplier™ technology to draw in air and amplify it up to 18 times, producing an uninterrupted stream of smooth air. With no blades or grill, they're safe, easy to clean and don't cause unpleasant buffeting.
View the range

www.dyson.co.uk/fans/

Show People How to Do Something

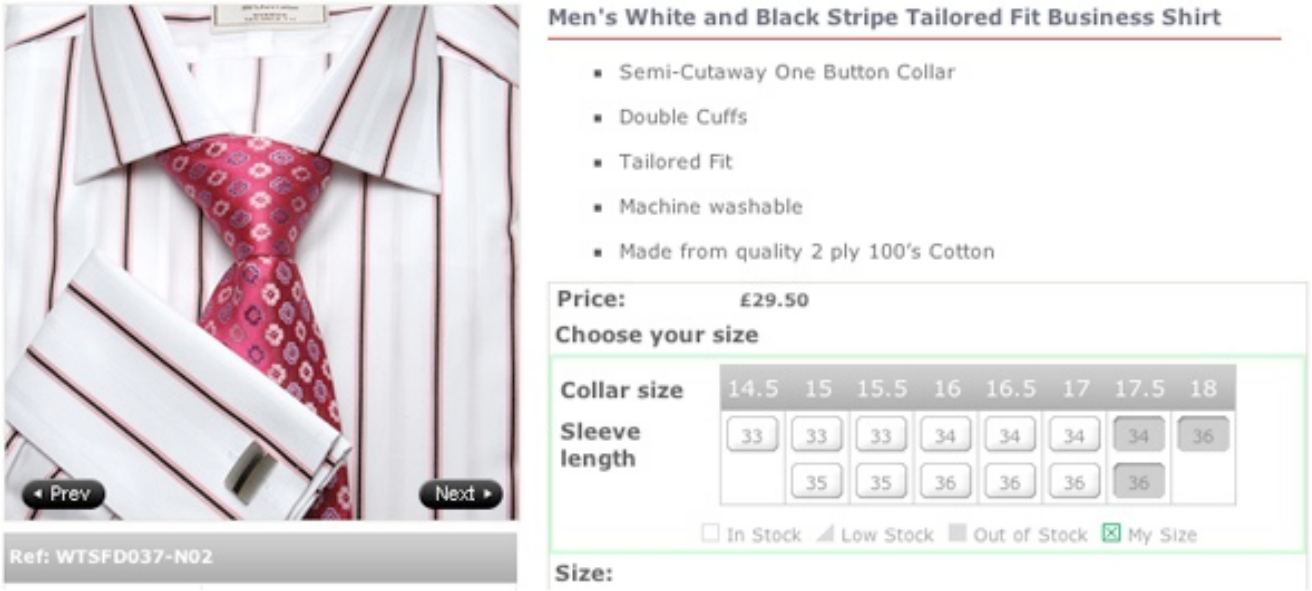
I'm usually the first one to toss out the instructions and work it out for myself. How hard could it be?! The example below illustrates how useful imagery can be when conveying a complex procedure.


iFixit
Join Us
Login
« Previous
Page 3 of 9
Next »
View
Edit
History
Step 7 — Logic Board
Edit
Grab the plastic pull tab secured to the display data cable lock and rotate it toward the DC-in side of the computer.
Pull the display data cable connector straight away from its socket.

www.ifixit.com

Don’t Mislead Users

People often jump to conclusions when shown certain types of images. We showed pictures of shirts during some recent testing, and people assumed they would come with cufflinks and ties, but these were added by the stylist to make the shirt look appealing.


Prev
Next
Ref: WTSFD037-N02
Men's White and Black Stripe Tailored Fit Business Shirt
Semi-Cutaway One Button Collar
Double Cuffs
Tailored Fit
Machine washable
Made from quality 2 ply 100's Cotton
Price: £29.50
Choose your size
Collar size 14.5 15 15.5 16 16.5 17 17.5 18
Sleeve length
33 33 33 34 34 34 34 36
35 35 36 36 36 36
In Stock Low Stock Out of Stock My Size
Size:

www.hawesandcurtis.com

Evoke an Emotional Response

Photography is often used to communicate hard-hitting messages (about the environment or human suffering, for example) because it evokes strong emotions. Charity campaigns, for example, know that by photography can get them the type of reaction they want.

Marine paradise in peril as BP oil disaster threatens to become worst ever
TIMES RECOMMENDS
Greece 'on brink of abyss' as three die in riots
'Worst ever' oil spill leaves ecosystem in peril
Teenager Tasered by police during baseball game
BORNEO WILDLIFE

www.timesonline.co.uk

Plug Accessories

Showing the product's accessories helps users imagine how they could enhance their experience of a product. Photos of accessories stimulate desire and offer suggestions about where to direct that desire (i.e. what to purchase next).

Nikon D3100 with 18-55mm VR Lens
+ Tamron 70-300mm F4/5.6 DI LD Macro (Nikon AF) + Sandisk Ultra SDHC 8GB Memory card + Jessops UV Filter 52mm + Jessops UV Filter 62mm + Jessops Trek 2 Shoulder Bag - Large
SAVE £82.00
Only £649.00
(normally £731.00)
Add to basket
Ultra
8GB
SanDisk

www.jessops.com

How To Use Photos To Sell More Online (Part II)

By James Chudley

Show Features and Versatility

Showing a product in use communicates what it's for and how to use it, and it helps users imagine how it will fit into their lives. It can result in a feeling of need; it will solve problems the users didn't realize they had!

www.timbuk2.com

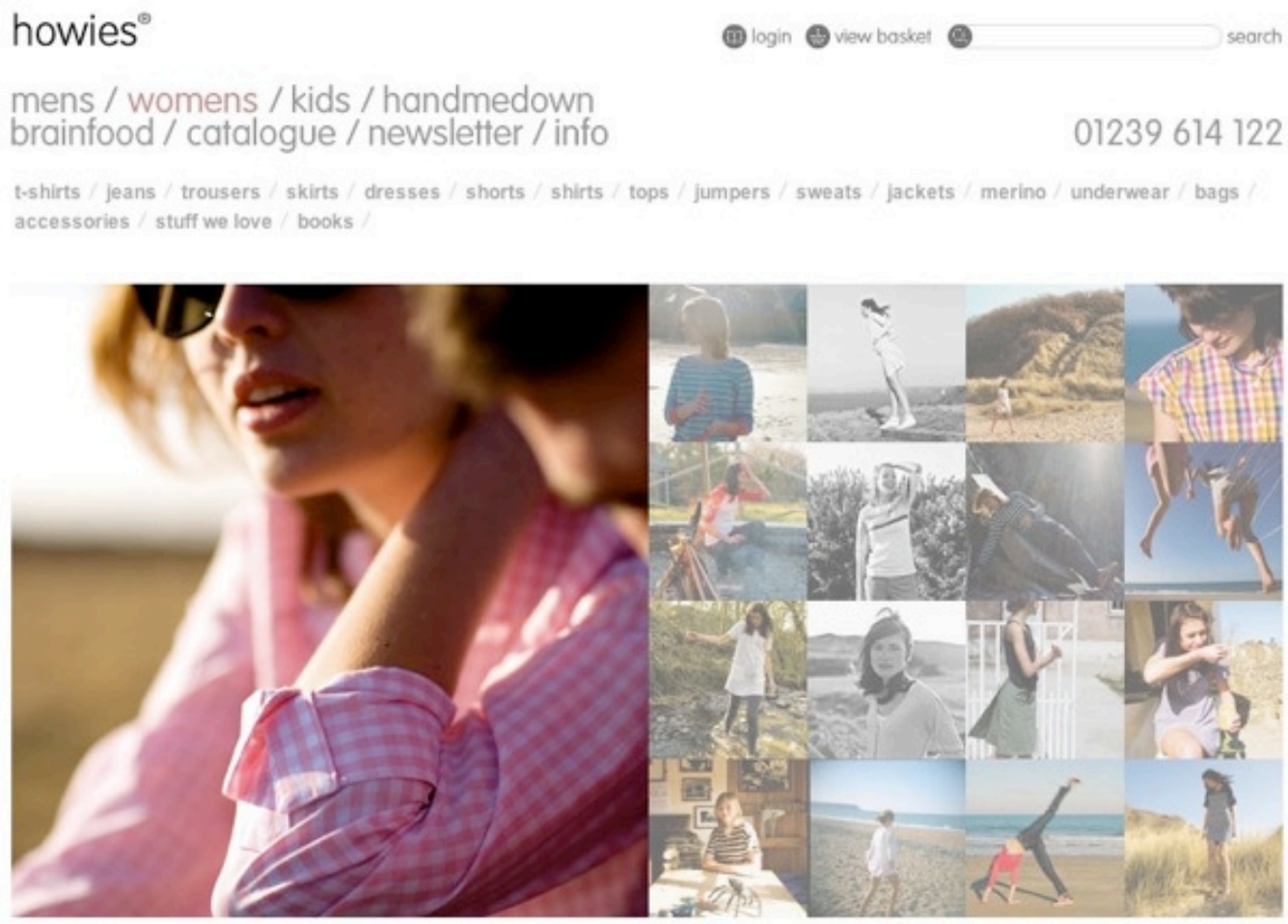
Understand Needs

I remember doing some testing for a major automotive client. The fellow was a keen kite surfer, so his primary interest was the size of the car's trunk. He is the perfect example of a customer who has primary considerations, or "deal-breakers", on which they are not willing to compromise. Photography can help your website communicate that needs are being met; sometimes, the more photos, the better.

www.citroen.co.uk

Match the Imagery to the Brand

Brands are created and reinforced by photography. A mental disconnect occurs when photos don't accord with the user's preconceptions about the brand. It feels wrong and makes the user question what the brand is all about.


howies®
login
view basket
search
mens / womens / kids / handmedown
brainfood / catalogue / newsletter / info
01239 614 122
t-shirts / jeans / trousers / skirts / dresses / shorts / shirts / tops / jumpers / sweats / jackets / merino / underwear / bags / accessories / stuff we love / books /

www.howies.co.uk

Sell a Lifestyle

Whether it's rural life, the good life or city living, everyone strives to live what they believe to be their perfect lifestyle, and we buy things that match that lifestyle. So, when products are displayed in the context of a lifestyle, we assign value to the product based on our desires. For a wonderful example from a TV campaign, check out the John Lewis "Never Knowingly Undersold" TV ad.

www.ikea.com

Demonstrate Exciting Features

Photography is instant communication, so make it about the best features of your product. I hate getting wet when I cycle, but a coat takes up loads of space in my bag; imagine how compelling the Montane image (below) was for me. I bought a Montane jacket.

www.montane.co.uk

Make It Beautiful

The camera generally lies. That is, beyond setting and context, there are all manner of camera tricks to help you make the subject look beautiful and desirable.

www.crownatwhitebrook.co.uk

Avoid Clichéd Stock Shots

We commonly get feedback from users about their universal loathing of stock photography. A recent project for a university client showed how users preferred “real” photos to stock images, despite their less polished look. Users wanted a realistic vision of what actually went on at that university.

www.yesbutnobutyes.com

Create Desire

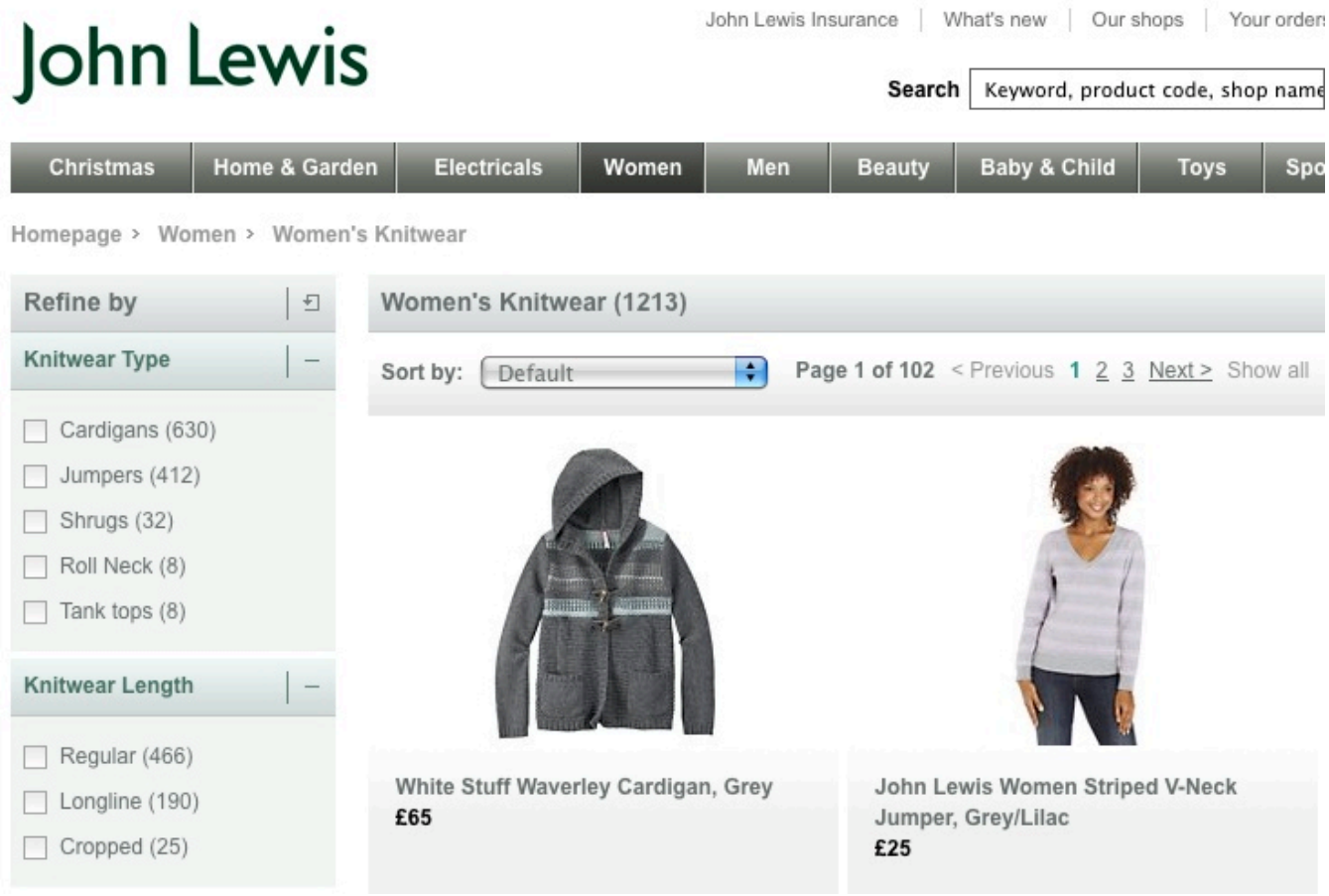
The Web is about self-service. It's also an ideal way to escape reality. Travel websites know how important it is for potential customers to see resorts and rooms before purchase and travel. They know that the customer needs to envision themselves in that hot relaxing place when they book tickets from their cold home in January.

BaileyRobinson
Travel Without Compromise
Destinations
Holiday finder
Luxury resorts
African safaris
Tailor-made journeys
Offers
About Bailey Robinson
TAILOR-MADE JOURNEYS
Journeys help you to get under the skin of a country. Our aim is for you to return home, not only with with memories to last a lifetime but a greater understanding of the world and your place within it.
Start your journey »
Ulun Danu Temple, Bali, Indonesia

www.baileyrobinson.com

Be Stylistically Consistent

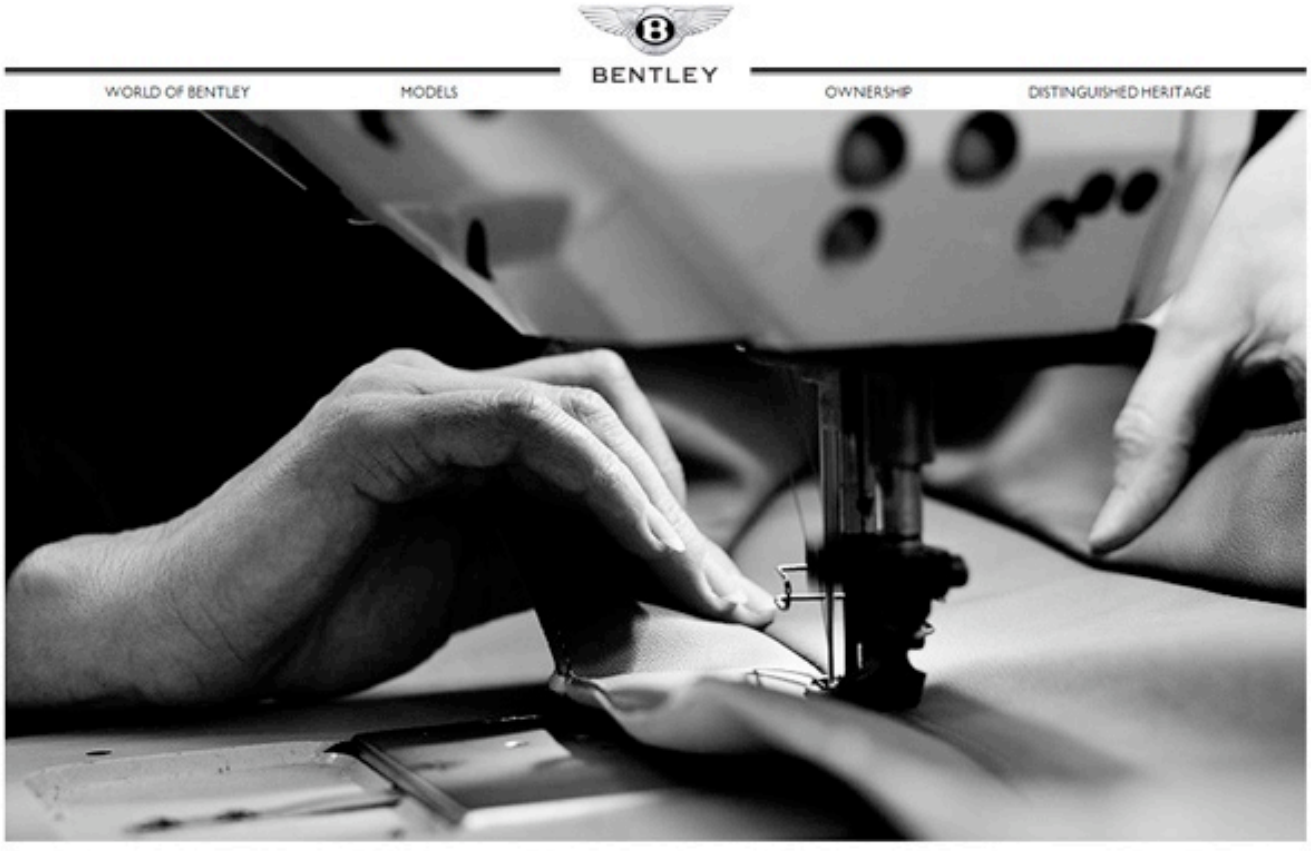
John Lewis, the UK department store, takes a painstaking approach to product photography, often taking up to 30 minutes to style individual items within a vast product range. The company defines and adheres to a particular photographic style. The results are stunning because the style is applied consistently.



www.johnlewis.com

Convey the Intangibles

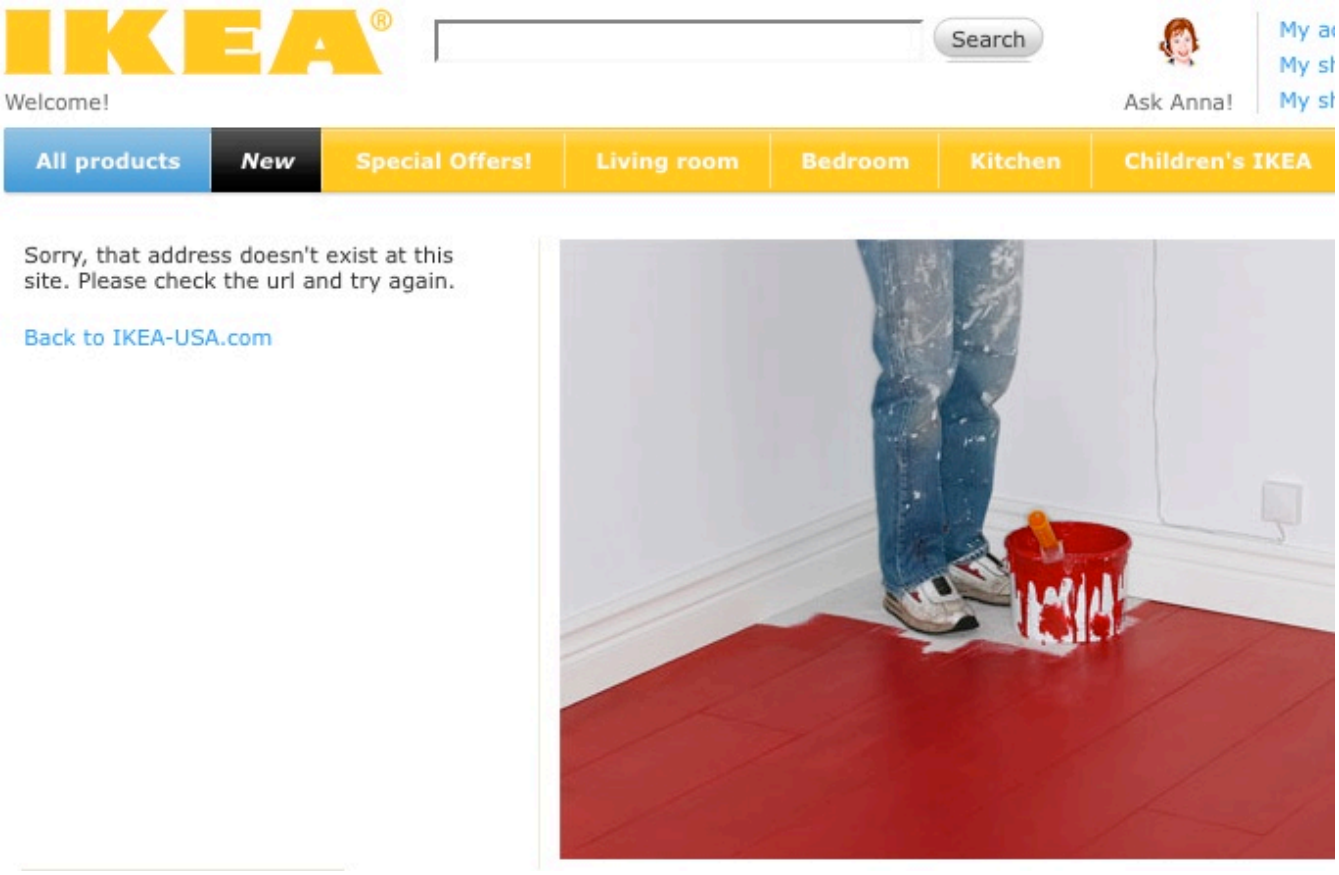
Bentley's sales often result from brand values such as quality, craftsmanship, heritage and tradition. Often, the qualities related to a product are hard to put into words. Photography can help convey those qualities clearly.



www.bentleymotors.com

Show Some Personality

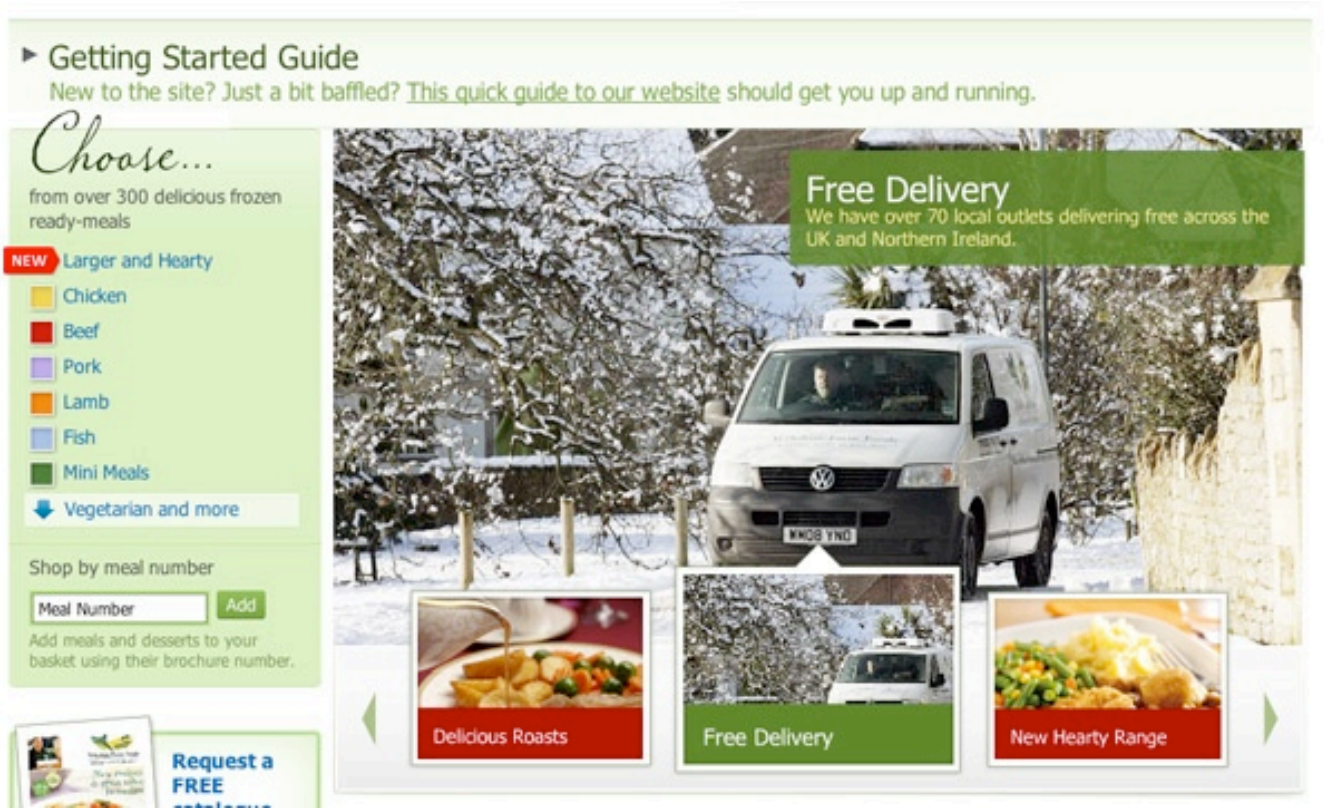
Photography can convey the essence of a product or service, but it can surprise and delight, too. I was looking for something recently on the Ikea website and came across the page below. It reinforces the fact that Ikea doesn't take itself too seriously, which is a nice touch, and easy to do.



www.ikea.com

Be Subtle Sometimes

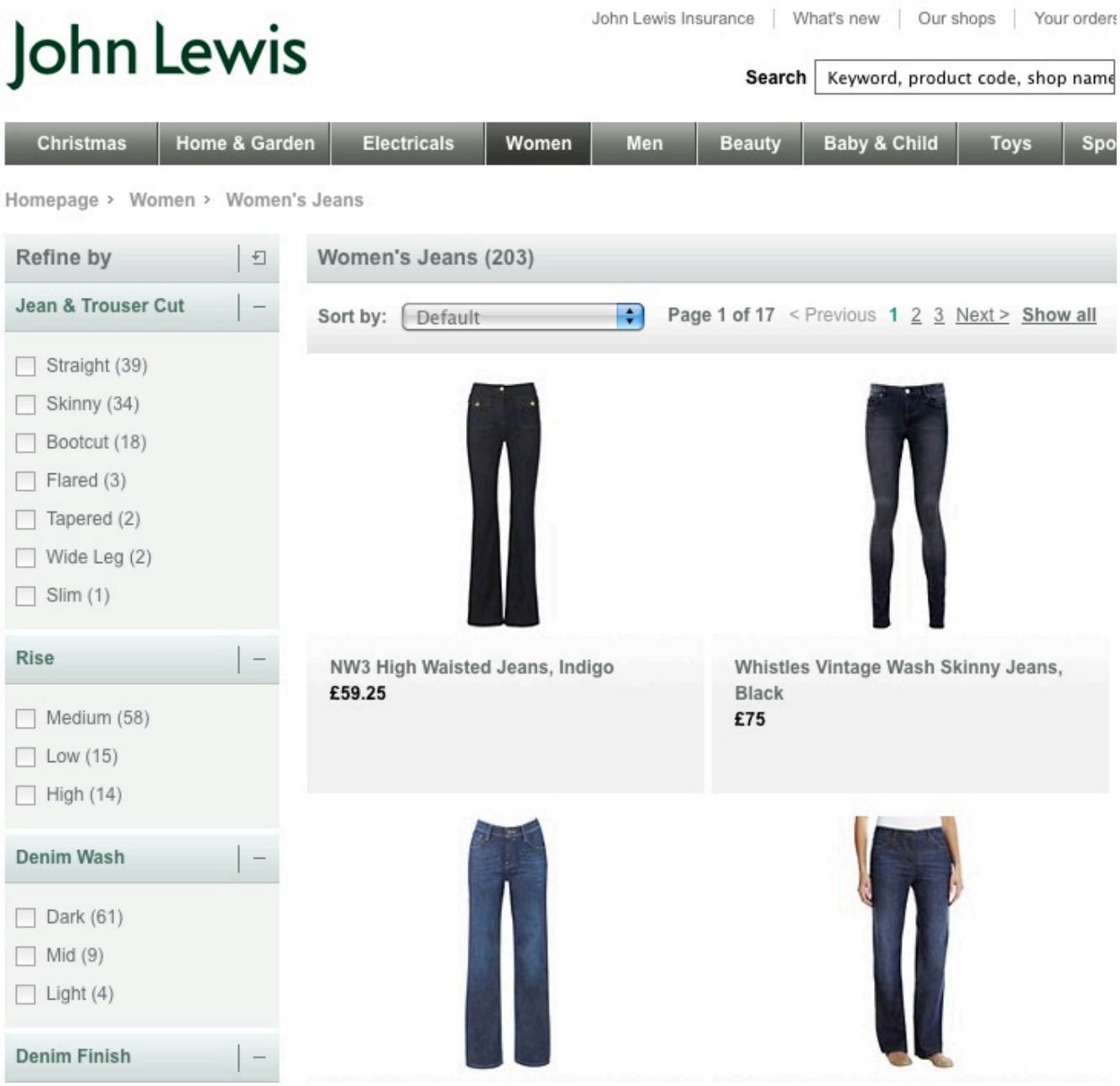
I recently conducted some research for Wiltshire Farm Foods. The response to this photo was amazing: users got the impression that food would be delivered to their elderly relatives whatever the weather. This was of critical importance to them because of the harsh winter. It's amazing how powerful subtlety can be.



www.wiltshirefarmfoods.com

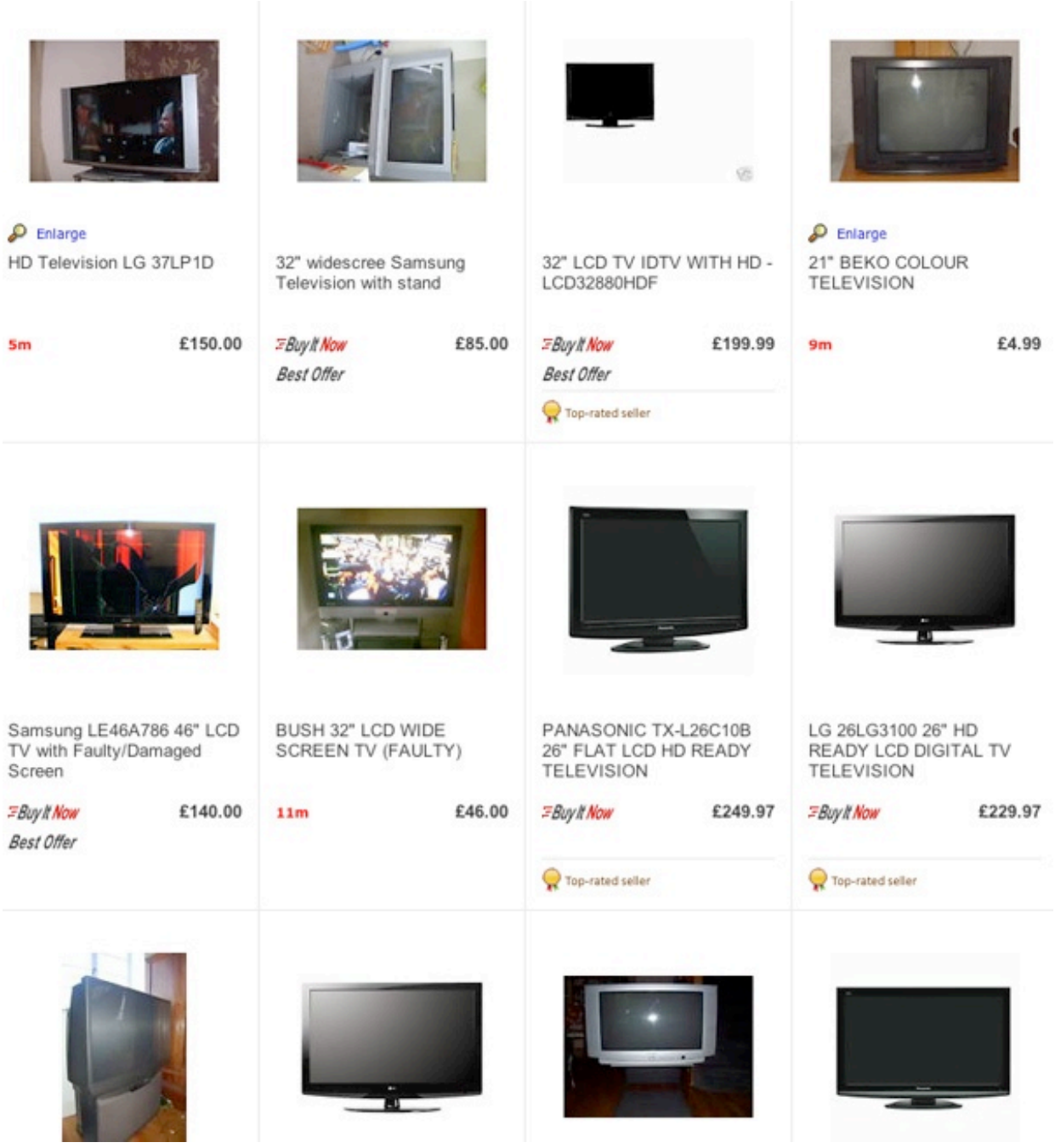
Look Professional

The rules of portraiture dictate that a simple uncluttered background will focus interest on the subject. This rule is applied well on product gallery pages, where product images are cut out and presented against a white background.



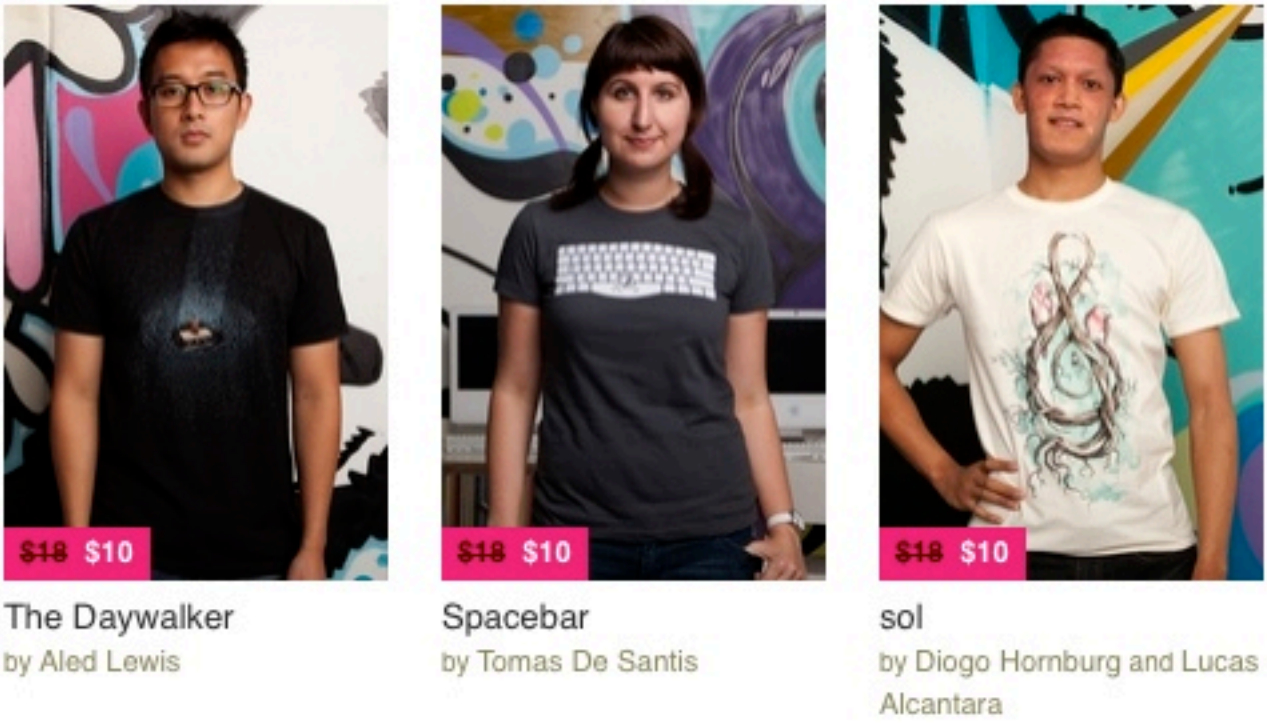
www.johnlewis.com

eBay unavoidably suffers from inconsistency, and the page below illustrates how much easier seeing products against a simple background is. Research into websites such as eBay and Etsy shows how important product photography is to buyers. Would you bid on a TV that you couldn't see a picture of?



electronics.shop.ebay.co.uk

Threadless breaks the rules, but with good reason. The varied backgrounds feels relaxed and shows off the product in a natural setting. The crop on the subject is tight enough that you get an impression of the environment that doesn't distract you from the subject.

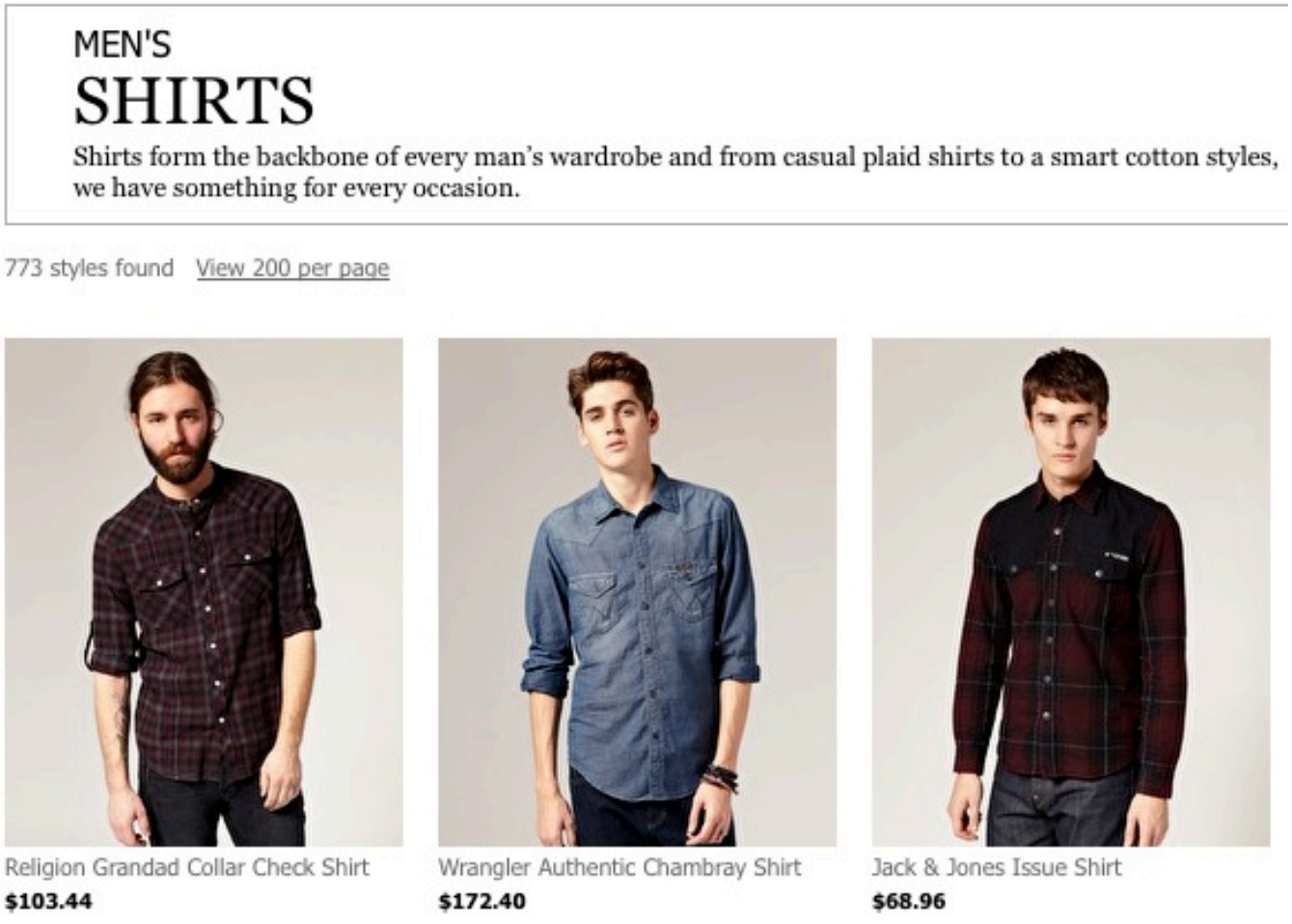


www.threadless.com

Be Consistent

Consistency draws attention to the important things (in the example below, shirts for sale). The eye is drawn to inconsistency, so make sure any inconsistency in your composition is deliberate.

A studio is the perfect controlled environment; you can ensure that lighting remains exactly the same between shots. The lighting style reinforces the brand's image. Examples include hard edgy light in photographs for a youth clothing brand, and soft ethereal light in photographs for an environmental lifestyle brand.


MEN'S
SHIRTS
Shirts form the backbone of every man's wardrobe and from casual plaid shirts to a smart cotton styles, we have something for every occasion.
773 styles found View 200 per page
Religion Grandad Collar Check Shirt
$103.44
Wrangler Authentic Chambray Shirt
$172.40
Jack & Jones Issue Shirt
$68.96

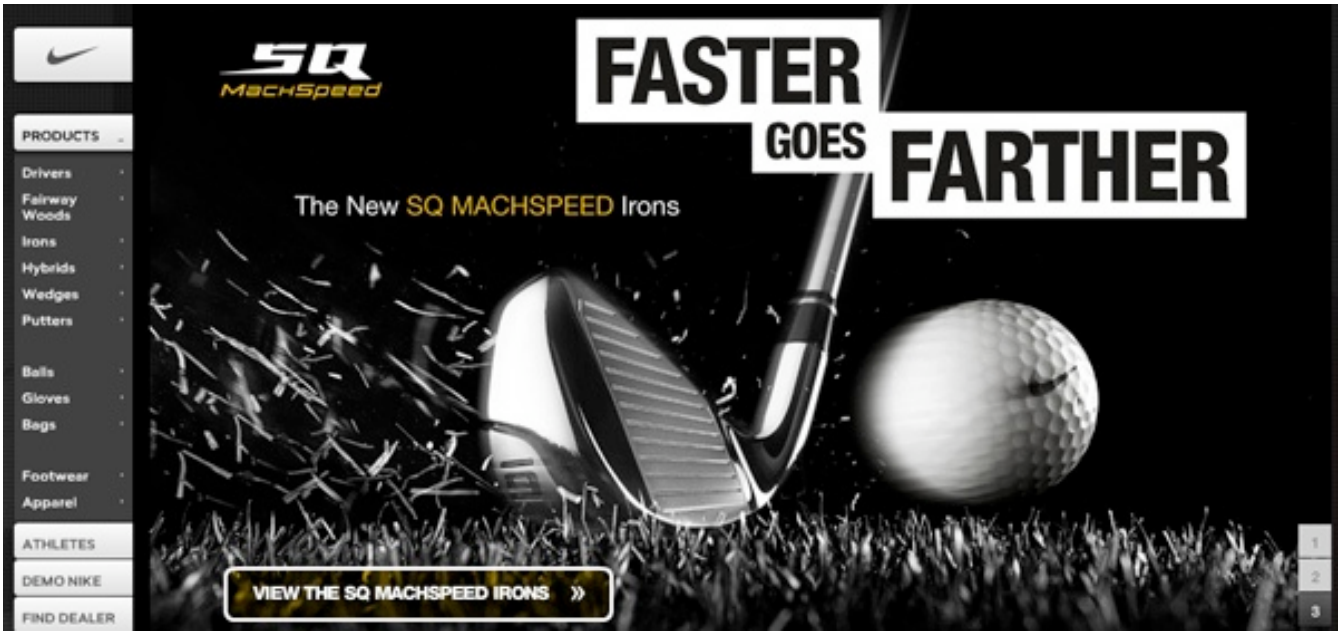
www.asos.com

How To Use Photos To Sell More Online (Part III)

By James Chudley

Use Unusual Vantage Points

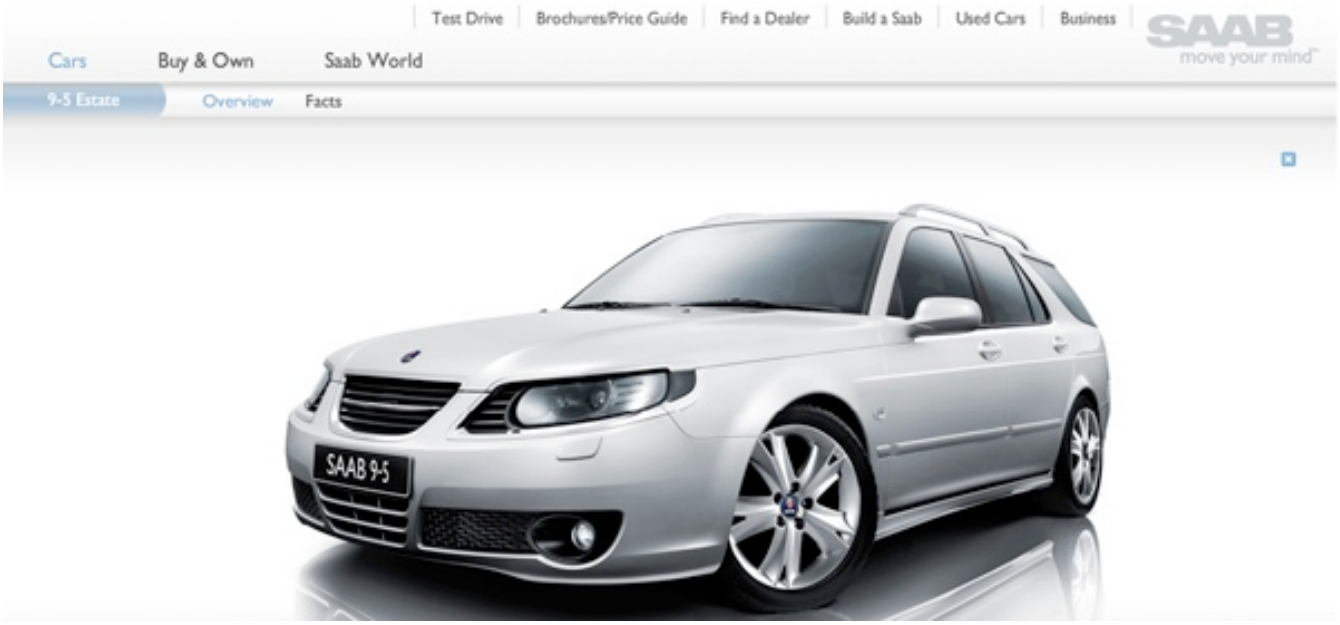
You can make an otherwise everyday object seem more interesting by shooting it from an angle that differs from the normal human line of sight. Sound advice: get high or get low. Do whatever you can to give a unique perspective.



www.nike.com

Shoot From the Best Angles

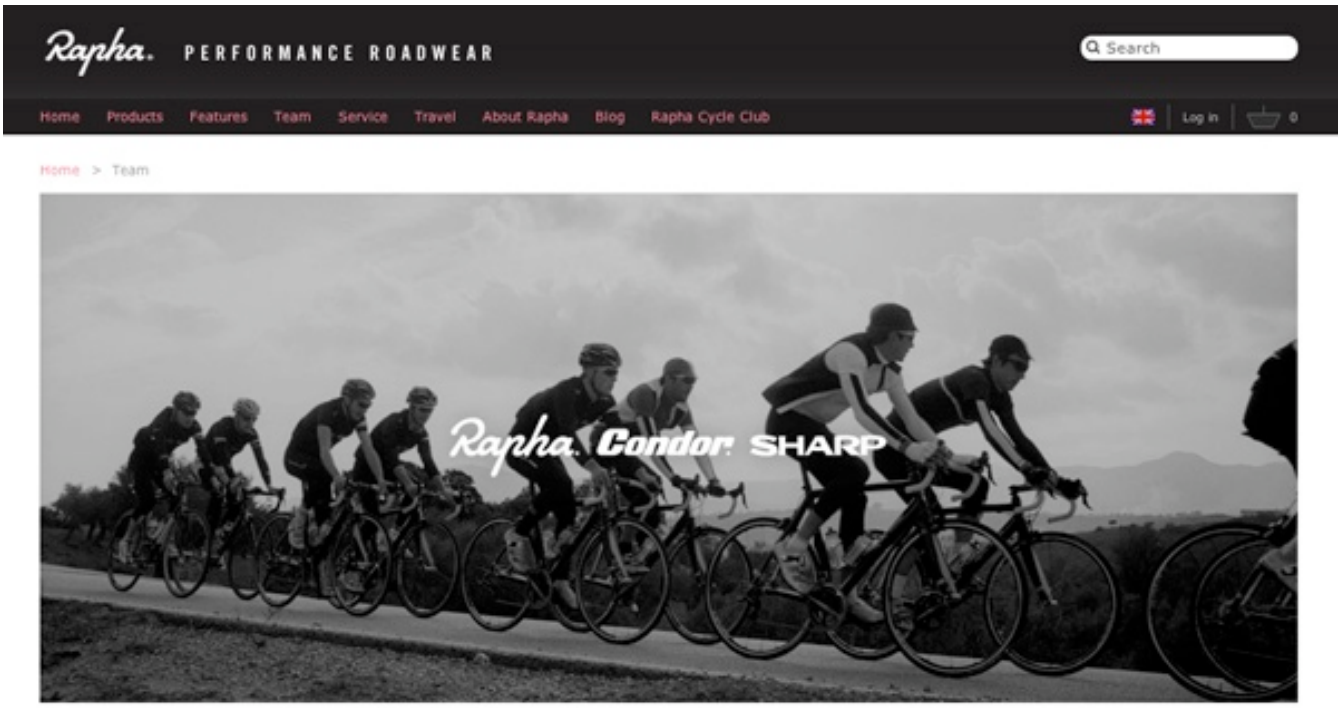
You will often hear people claim that they prefer to be photographed from a certain side or from their "best angle." Products also have flattering and unflattering angles. Peruse some automotive websites and brochures; see how many cars are shot from a three-quarter angle. This angle suggests power and scale. The shots are clearly designed to appeal to a masculine audience.



www.saab.co.uk

Show Objects in Their Natural Environment

The environment in which you place the subject helps the viewer understand the product's purpose and suitability. A shot of a grizzly in its natural habitat seems much more fitting and "real" than a shot of that grizzly bear in, say, a parking lot. Product shots in an appropriate environment suggest both where and how the product can be used.



www.rapha.cc

Convey a Sense of Scale

Buying something online can be problematic. Predicting its suitability is difficult without seeing or touching it. (Will it fit? Will it match? Will it look right?) Including an object with a known size in the photograph presents the viewer with an immediate visual reference.

www.ford.co.uk

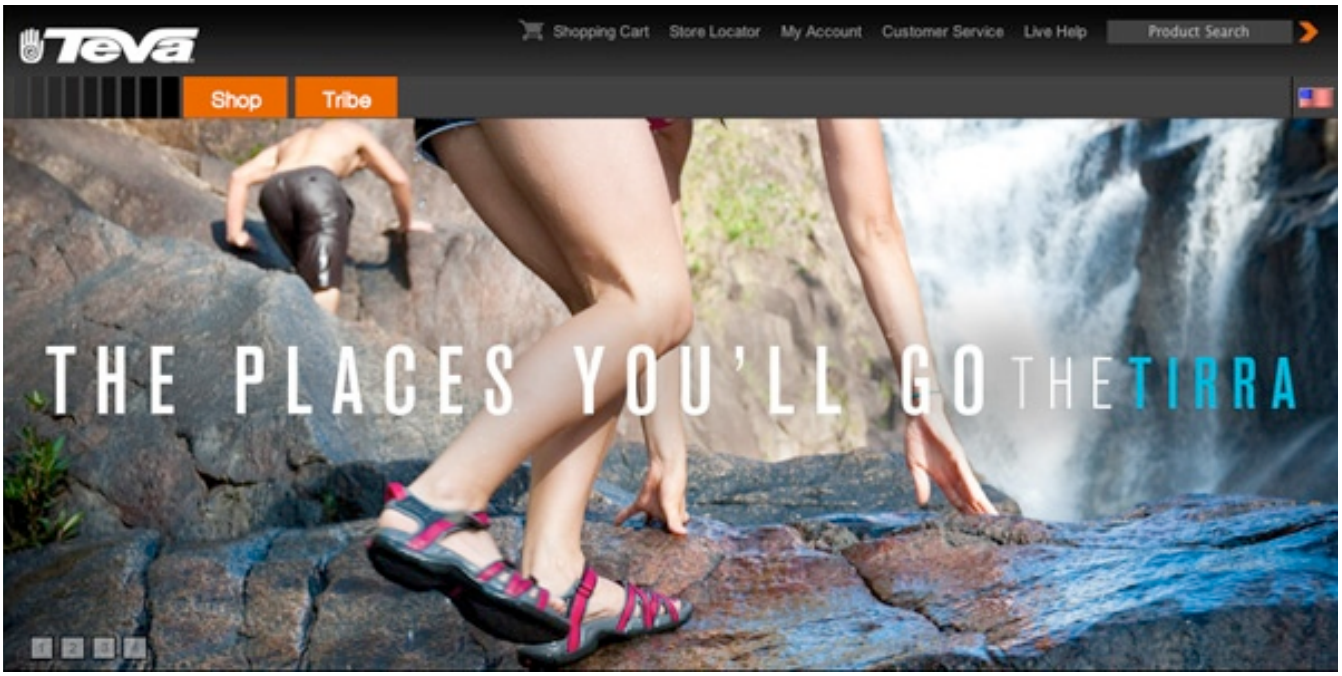
Image Size Is Important

Increasingly fast Internet connections allow clients to work with large images. On real estate websites, for examples, images can't be big enough; users want to fully explore their potential new homes. That said, if you will be offering a "larger view" of a photo, make sure it really is significantly larger. (My experience with testing has shown me that users are annoyed by "larger" images that are only marginally larger.)

www.apple.com/uk/ipad/

Show the Product in Use

People want to be sure they are buying what they want or need. Show the product in use to help the user see that it suits their needs. Following the advice “show, don’t tell” removes the need for additional explanatory text.



www.teva.com

Show How It Works

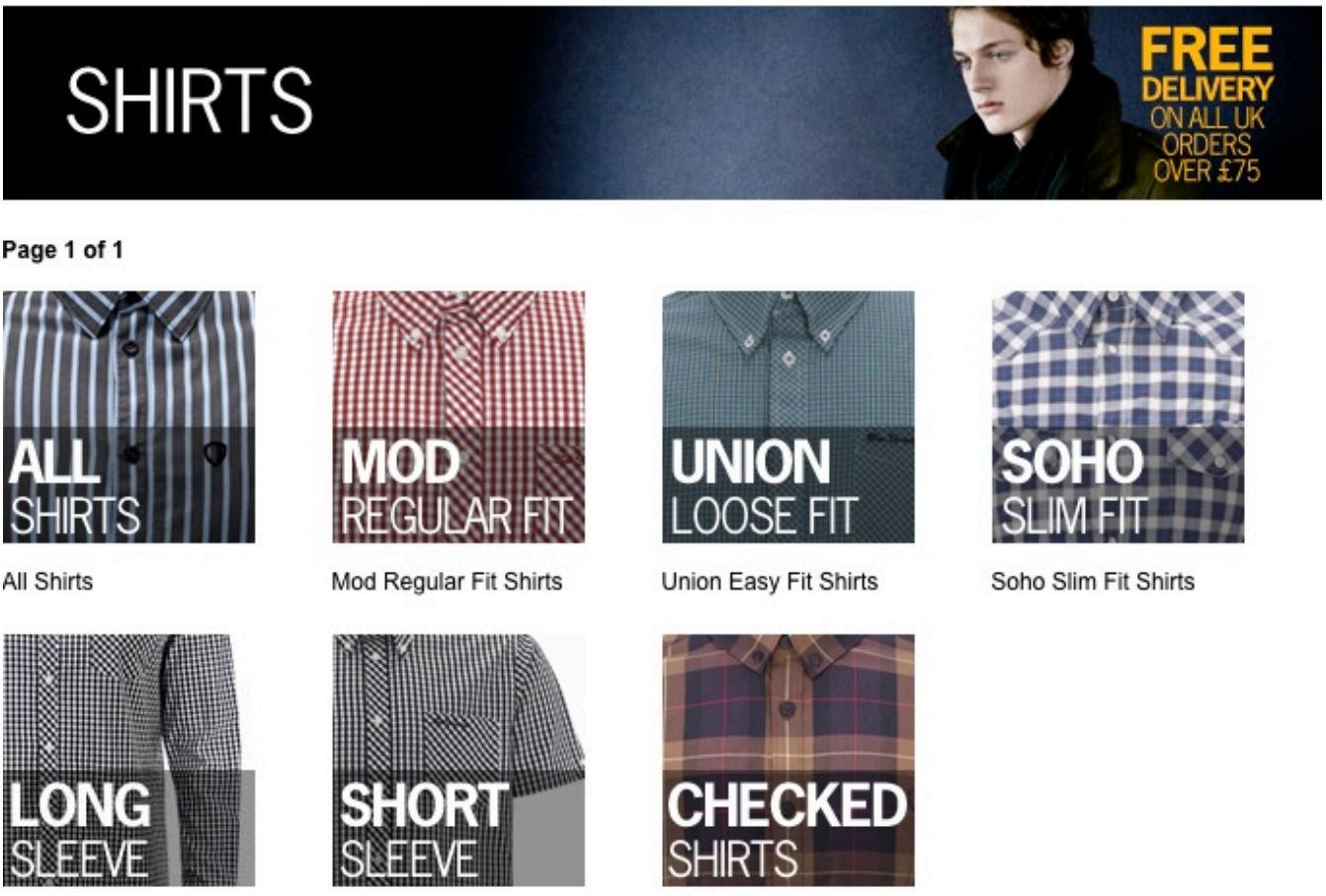
Consider the pineapple slicer (below). You'd pick it up in a kitchen shop and think, "What the heck is this?" Now try explaining how it works on a website without a photo. A nightmare. Again, show, don't tell.

3-in-1 Pineapple Corer/Slicer
Corkscrew-style pineapple peeler, corer and slicer with 3 size adaptors.
Peel and slice a pineapple quicker than opening a can!
Working like a corkscrew, it peels, cores and slices a pineapple in one straightforward action, leaving you the shell to use as a bowl for exotic desserts and cocktails.
The 3 adaptors cater for small, medium and large pineapples.
D Dishwasher Safe
Ref 10478
recommend to a friend

www.lakeland.co.uk

Make Choosing Easy

A recent client had over 90 variations of an everyday product available for sale. The variations were meant to offer flexibility, but they bamboozled customers. The example from Ben Sherman (below) is another case of too much or poorly explained variety. How does “mod” style differ from “union” style, for example? I have no idea. The photography should make it clear but doesn’t.



www.bensherman.com

Enhance the Experience

I don't know why Bing decided to put images behind its search screen, but I like to imagine that they thought, "Heck, why not?" We like things that are emotional or visceral. Good experiences with products and services feed on our tastes and bring return business. So, if Bing helps you find what you're looking for and is also visually appealing, you'll use it again and again.

www.bing.com

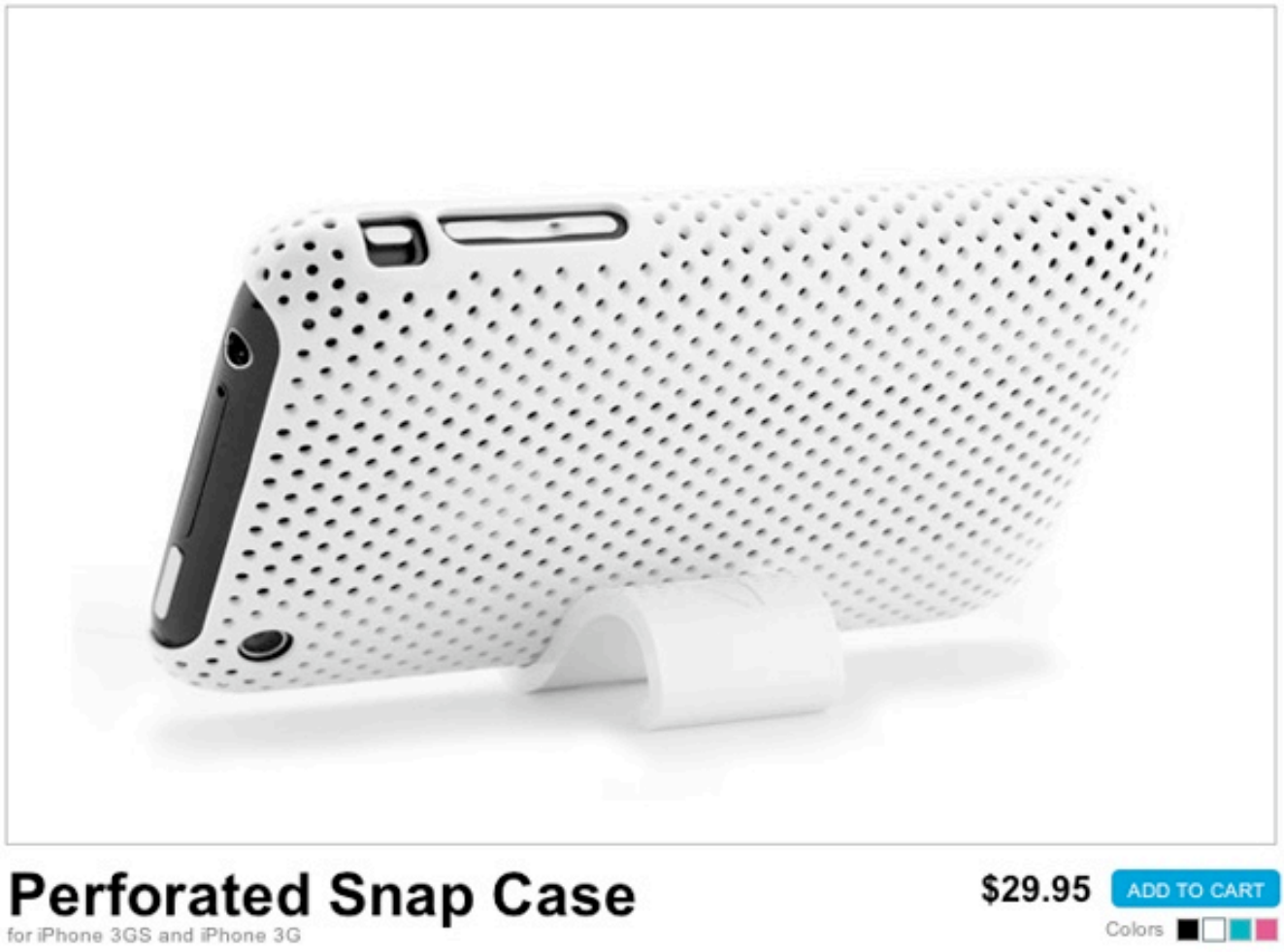
Show Details

Here is a true example of why showing details works. I recently bought a bike. A deal-maker for me was the ability to secure a rack to a fixed part of the bike; I wasn't going to buy a bike without this. The *Evans* website provided large zoomable photos that allowed me to check for this detail. I bought my bike from Evans.

www.evanscycles.com

Show Me What It Looks Like

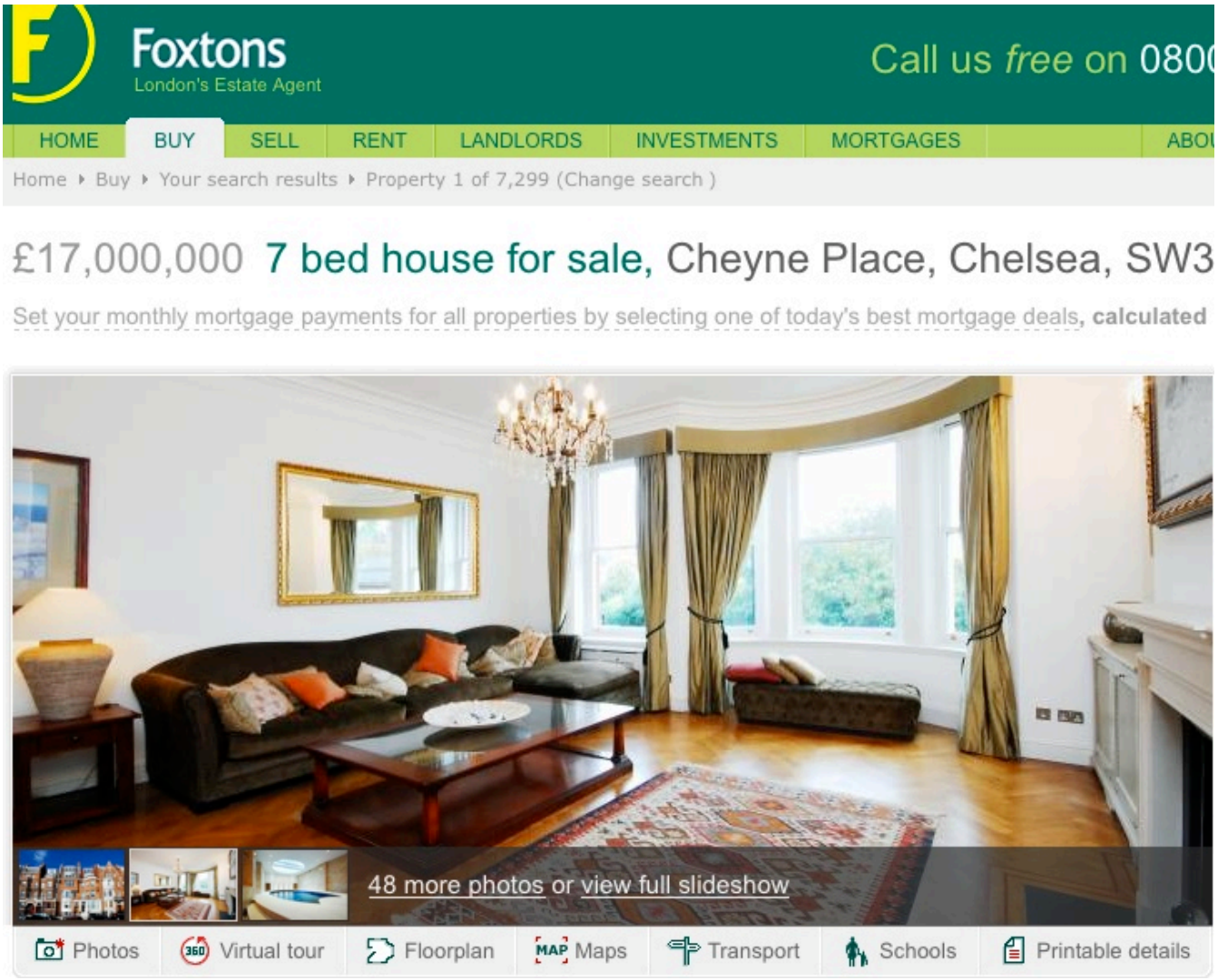
I've mentioned this already in a roundabout way, but showing the product raises interest and brings business.



www.goincase.com

Encourage Interaction

A recent test I was involved in asked users to try out the websites of different real estate agents. One user completely reversed their initial opinion of one of the agents when they saw the number of detailed photographs available; they expressed delight and interest. Encouraging interaction by providing functions such as zoom and rotate leads to a satisfying user experience.



www.foxtons.co.uk

Show Me I'm in the Right Place

An important aspect of way-finding in digital environments is showing people where they are. Google accomplished this in a literal sense with Street View on Google Maps; this was an innovative use of photography. When we meet with clients in unfamiliar locations, for example, we can see what the place looks like beforehand. We feel prepared and less anxious about being late.

maps.google.co.uk

Conclusion

Photographs play a crucial role in informing, influencing, educating and reassuring customers throughout the buying process. Review your website's photography and question its role. What is the job of a particular photo at that particular stage of the process? Is it effective? When might customers drop out, and how could photos prevent that from happening?

The task of image selection often falls to the designer. User experience professionals should actively influence the process of selecting photos for the buying process. The days of having a placeholder for images in our wireframes and prototypes are over. We should be annotating our work to influence decisions that art directors make when selecting images. Consider these principles to ensure that the images you choose not only "look right" but also work well.

Website owners should recall the principles mentioned in this article when commissioning new photos and researching stock. Focus on the purpose of the images, and you will turn photos from window dressing into key conversion tools.

Design To Sell: 8 Useful Tips To Help Your Website Convert

By Dmitry Fadeyev

As we see more and more businesses move their services online, and even more that begin their life on the Web, a greater need arises for websites that are designed and built to sell. A great-looking website may achieve the goal of shaping and delivering a strong brand, but its good looks alone aren't enough to sell the products or services on offer. For that, you need to introduce the element of marketing.

1. Subliminal Suggestion

Research shows that objects and images you see around you can prime you for certain behaviors. For example, a study on children showed that after being shown a Santa Claus cap, they were more likely to share candy with others. The cap embodied the concept of sharing and giving in their minds, and exposure to it primed them for regarding sharing more positively. The same study also exposed kids to a "Toys 'R' Us" logo, which had the opposite effect of the Santa Claus cap, making them less likely to share their candy.

Legacy Locker
Features
Why Legacy Locker?
Pricing & Sign Up
Support
The safe and secure way to pass your online accounts to your friends and loved ones.
Legacy Locker is a safe, secure repository for your vital digital property that lets you grant access to online assets for friends and loved ones in the event of loss, death, or disability.
The value of web accounts
Protect your online assets
Privacy and security
Family and loved ones
Financial and estate planners
Sign Up Now
in 60 seconds or less

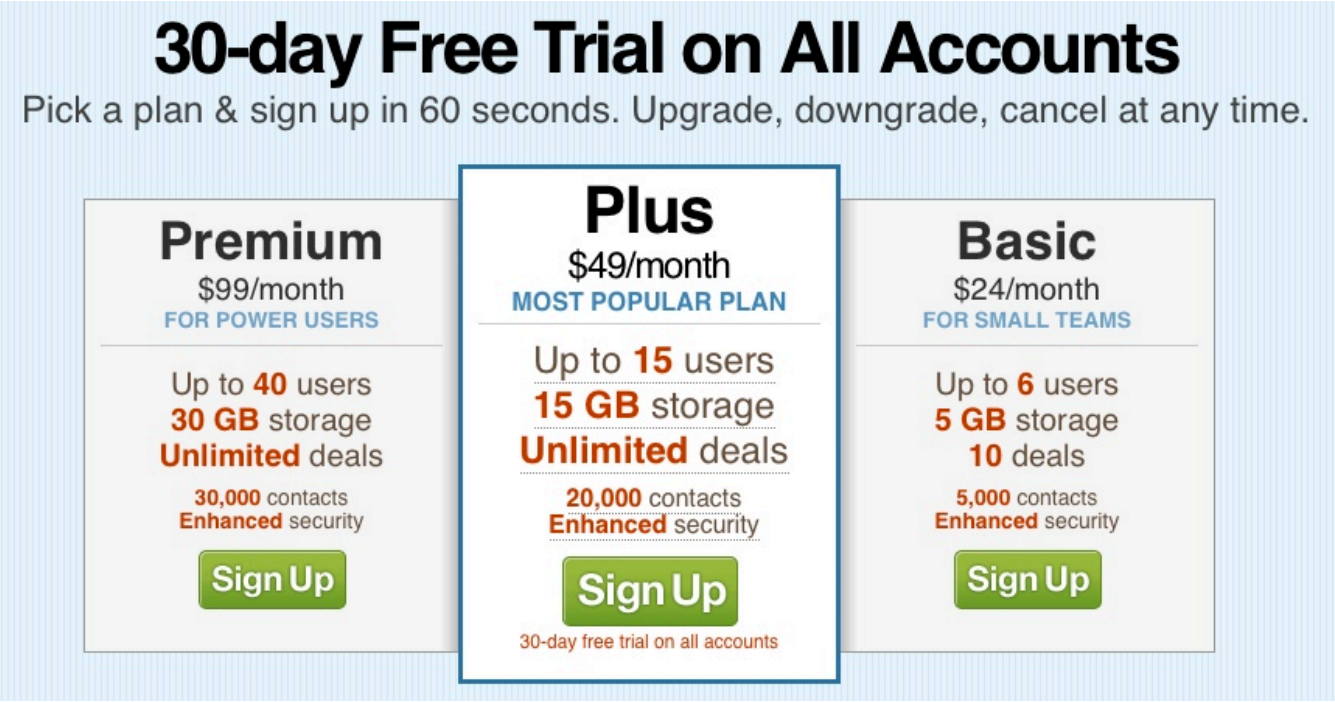
LegacyLocker features a photo of a happy family on its landing page, presumably to evoke in visitors a warm feeling for its product and a desire to care for their loved ones.

When choosing images for your website, think carefully about the message you're trying to send. Pick images that are meaningful and that embody that message or feeling. Don't put graphics on your website for their own sake — if they're not doing a job, they don't have to be there. Clichéd and overused imagery and stock photos are also dangerous because it may not send the right message in the given context, so select images that get the effect you're after.

2. Prevent Choice Paralysis

There is a phenomenon in marketing known as "choice paralysis." Choice paralysis happens when the user is given too many options. Choice is great, but when your customers are presented with too many options, they may be confused about where to go. Nobody wants buyer's remorse (where a person chooses an item and decides later it's not right for them), so many people spend more time than they should on the selection process: they become paralyzed.

In fact, according to Barry Schwatz, when customers have too many options to consider, they end up avoiding a specific service or the task in general (*Paradox of Choice*) – and this is exactly what we as designers need to carefully consider in our designs.



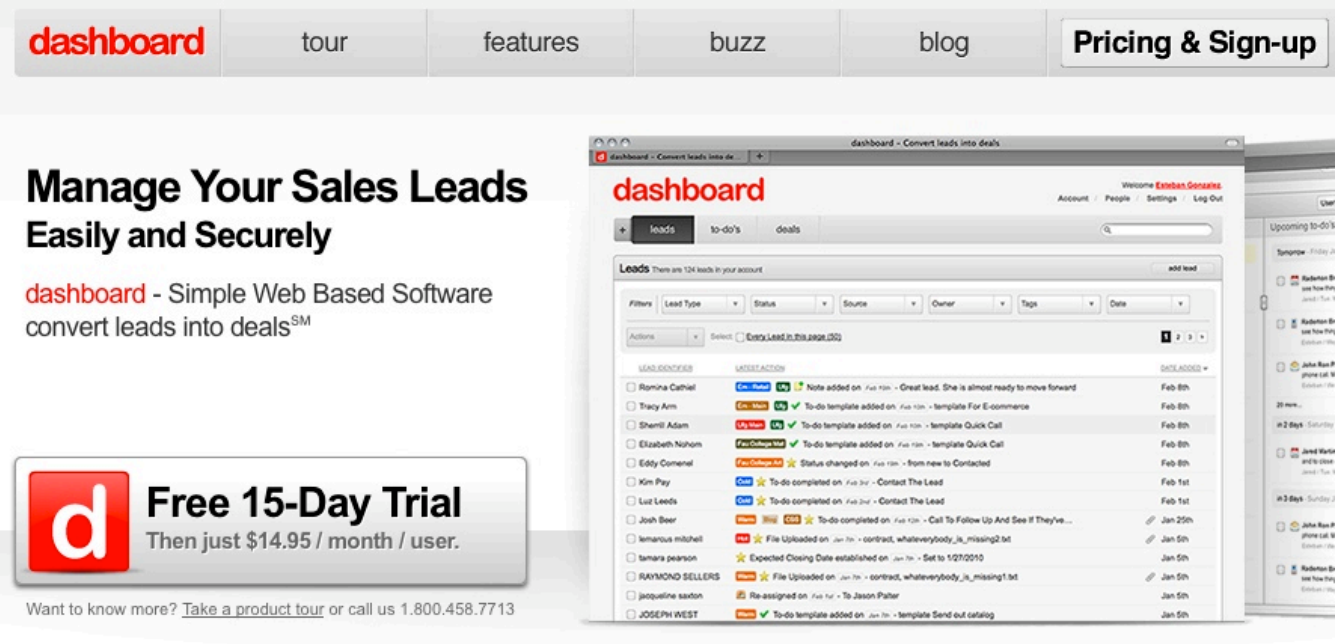
The Highrise pricing list shows a set of monthly payment plans. The most popular one stands out visually to help you make a choice.

To remedy choice paralysis, make it easier for people to find the right product or service for them. Tell them what each option is great for, and then suggest the one they should choose. You can even use visuals to highlight the most popular product and steer potential customers towards it. If the product is not right for them, they'll pick another, but if they're confused, a "default" choice helps prevent choice paralysis.

3. Show The Product

When you visit a physical store, perhaps a grocery, you can look at, examine and sometimes even taste the products on sale. You make your purchasing decision based on the information you gather there. Are the tomatoes ripe enough? Are those strawberries red enough? What about the look and smell of that freshly baked bread?

When you sell services or Web apps online, you should do exactly the same thing: show the product. It's surprising how many websites that sell software don't actually show screenshots of their applications. Sure, these are intangible goods, digital goods that you can't touch or smell, but they're still goods you can *see*.



Dashboard puts large screenshots of its lead-tracking app right on the front page.

People make judgments based on what products look like. Why? Because appearance is an indicator, rightly or wrongly, of a product's usability. This is known as the *aesthetic-usability effect*.

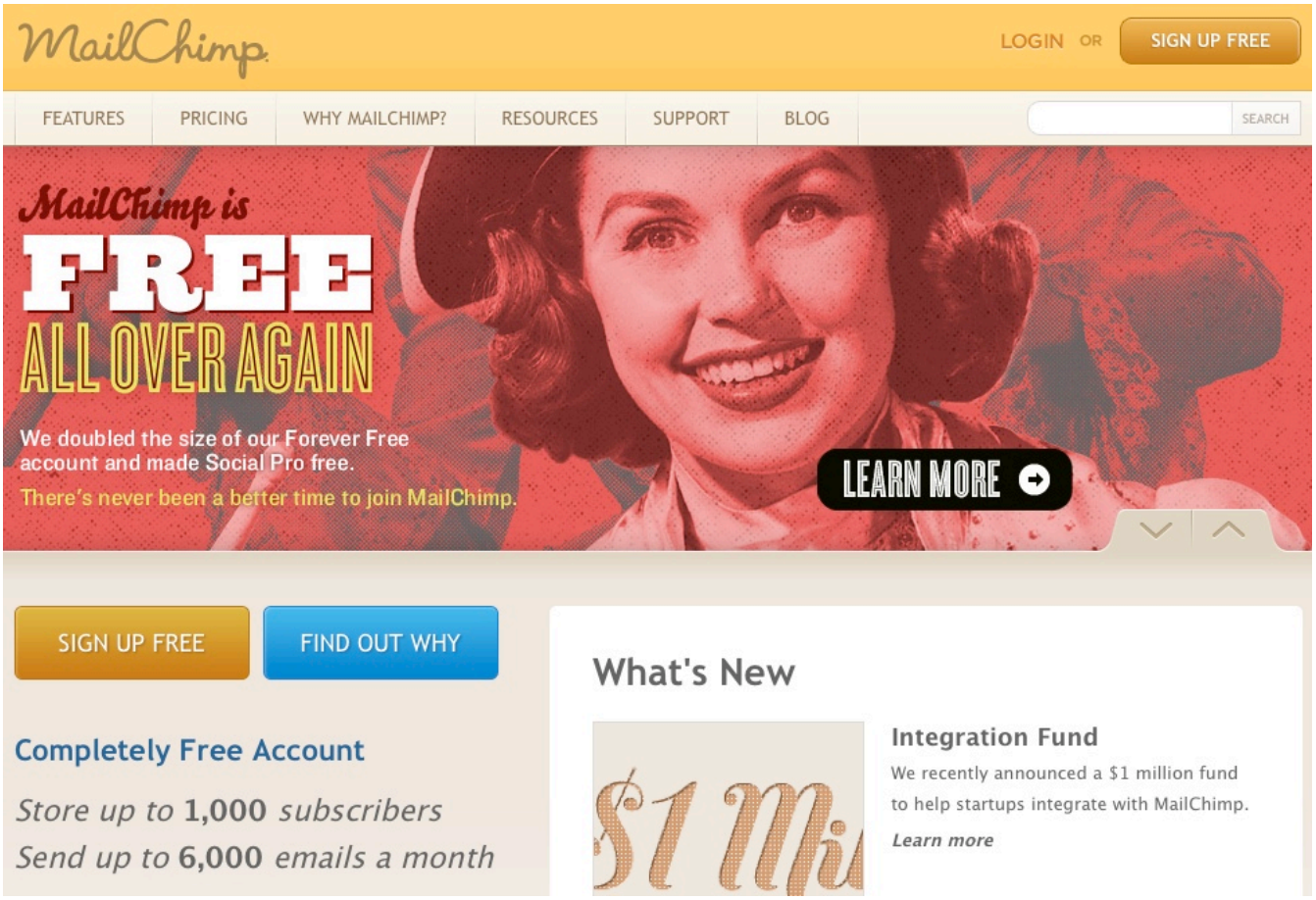
Xtorrent, a torrent download client for OS X, has a product screenshot right at the top of its minimalist landing page.

If people see a complicated and cluttered interface or, in some cases, even just an unattractive interface, they may assume it is not very usable or is hard to learn. On the other hand, if people see an attractive and simple-looking interface, they may start figuring out how it works right then and will want to give it a try. Get people to imagine using your software, and you'll get closer to closing the sale.

4. Let People Try It

Once you start using a product, you become involved in it. Once you start entering data into it, you begin to make it your own. Every second a user spends trying out features is a second of their time invested in learning and using your product.

When that user is then presented with the question of whether to purchase or subscribe to the product or service, they will more likely say "yes" because they are already involved and have invested time in it. Of course, if the product is bad, then it may turn people off, but then your priority should really be to improve the product until it reaches a level people are happy with.



MailChimp, an email marketing service, allows you to start using the service for free with your first 100 subscribers.

In recent years, we've seen the emergence of the *"freemium"* business model. A freemium service allows people to use a portion of it free of charge, but requires a purchase to use all of its features. It gives people a taste of the full product but doesn't limit them to a trial period. This lets them use the product for free without monetary commitment and then upgrade if they like it.

It's a great model for many online Software-as-a-Service businesses because once somebody begins using your product, they get sucked in. They start to rely on it, and when they rely on it to do business or manage

their life, they will very likely need the premium features down the line and will be happy to upgrade because they already know your service well.

Stories are very important in sales because they get potential customers to imagine what it would be like to use your product. Letting people actually try your product for free goes even further. They don't have to imagine because they can begin using it right away at no cost. Letting people try out your product, whether through a demo, a trial period or a freemium model, is an excellent way to win customers. Now, this isn't really a "design" element but is important to mention here because of its potential to drive conversions.

5. AIDA

AIDA is a well-known strategy in sales and stands for: Attention, Interest, Desire and Action. It is relatively simple and describes the sequence of events you should aim for to get a sale. So, first of all, you must capture the *attention* of your potential customer. Once you have it, you should win their *interest* by explaining how your product or service can help them.

Then, once they're interested, generate a *desire* in them for your product. For example, a story about how this product has helped someone like your visitor can help them imagine what this product would do for them, and especially what benefits it would bring. Indeed, the benefit part is key here because benefits, not features, sell products.

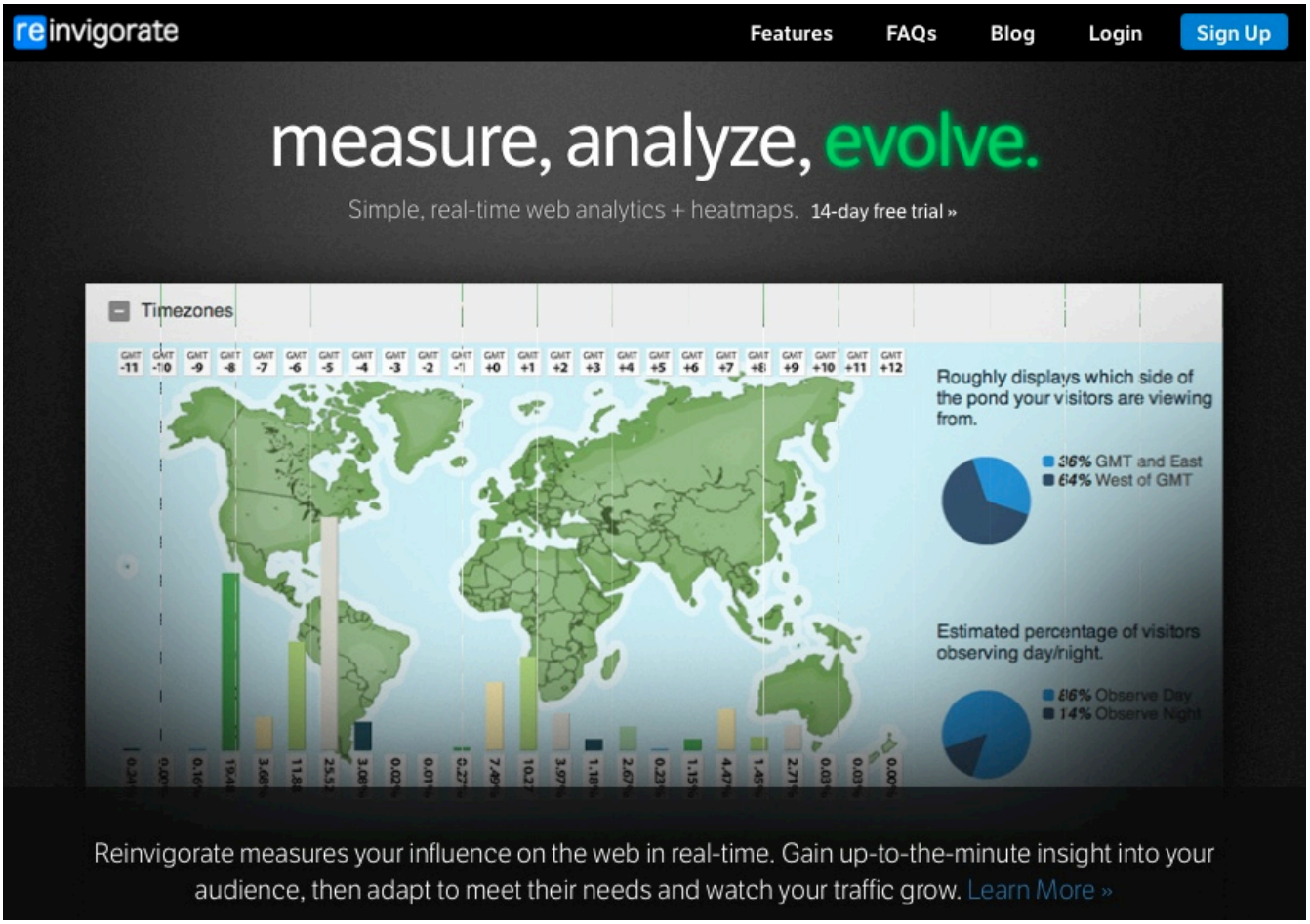
Finally, you need to get people to *act*. This means purchasing the product or signing up for the service. If people want your product, all they may need is a button to check out. If they are interested but not yet sure, you could use a few methods to motivate them further; for example, creating a sense of urgency with a limited-time offer or limited supply.

STORE LOGIN
CREATE YOUR OWN INDEPENDENT STORE IN SECONDS... AND TAKE OVER THE WORLD
CURRENTLY FEATURES 16532 PRODUCTS IN 4617 STORES
IT'S FREE AND EASY:
→ SIGN UP
→ CHOOSE YOUR STORE DESIGN
→ UPLOAD YOUR PRODUCT IMAGES
→ LINK TO YOUR PAYPAL
→ START SELLING!
CREATE YOUR STORE NOW!
yokaboo
Home | Stores | Features | About | Blog | FAQ | Free Sign Up!
Store Login »

Yokaboo features large, eye-catching graphics. You're likely to first read the short description on the left. The stats on the t-shirt then help build trust. Finally, you are presented with a call to action on the right.

Now, the AIDA approach applies more to copy — the actual marketing text on the website — than design, so what we need to do on the design side is reinforce that copy, make it stand out and ensure visitors read it. This means making sure the first thing a new visitor sees really grabs their attention. The flow of the page should then direct their focus to the items that achieve the other two goals: interest and desire. Finally, at the end of this flow, we need to convert. So, provide calls to action: "Order now," "Sign up here."

It's important to understand that the design alone won't sell: you need strong copy in place to do most of that work. The design is there to reinforce and support the copy, rather than the other way around.


reinvigorate
Features
FAQs
Blog
Login
Sign Up
measure, analyze, evolve.
Simple, real-time web analytics + heatmaps. 14-day free trial »
Timezones
Roughly displays which side of the pond your visitors are viewing from.
36% GMT and East
64% West of GMT
Estimated percentage of visitors observing day/night.
86% Observe Day
14% Observe Night
Reinvigorate measures your influence on the web in real-time. Gain up-to-the-minute insight into your audience, then adapt to meet their needs and watch your traffic grow. Learn More »

Reinvigorate captures your attention with three large words at the top: "measure. analyze. evolve." You're then led to a more descriptive bit of text below and a call to action link.

This means you shouldn't design a nice website first and then fill up the space with words. Instead, think about the message you want to send out, write the copy and then construct a design that delivers that. If a delivery truck breaks down, then the package does not arrive, but if there was no package in the first place, then the delivery wouldn't matter at all.

6. Guide attention

To benefit from something like AIDA, you have to lead your visitors through your content. You can do this by aligning items in a manner that will flow, and using images that guide the eyes. For example, if you want to focus attention somewhere, use a big arrow. Our eyes will notice the arrow and will naturally want to see where it points to.

The content on the Silverback site flows down towards the download button. Additionally, the arrow on that button points towards the purchase link.

Structure your content in a way that will flow towards something. Having a bunch of scattered feature descriptions may confuse and make your visitors lost, unless of course if all of the points end in calls to action. If you want to ensure your visitors don't miss anything, align everything in a linear structure so that the user scans along it. Make sure to end it with the ultimate call to action: that signup or download link.

7. Always Provide Next Actions

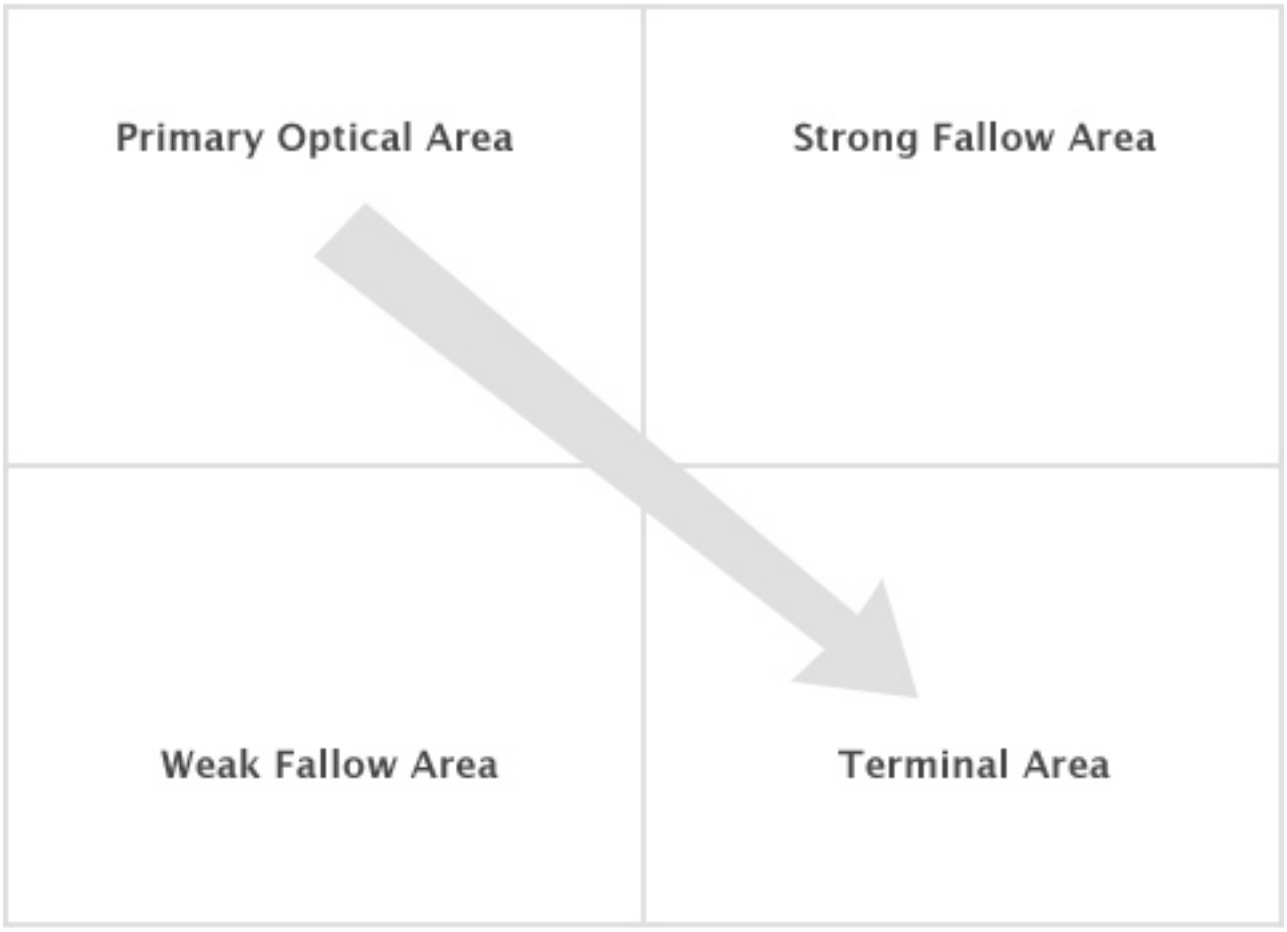
ABC: Always Be Closing. If you're designing a website to sell something, whether a software application or Web service, you should always be thinking about how you're closing the deal on each page. This doesn't mean filling every page with big "Buy now" buttons; it means when the customer is ready to buy, they shouldn't have to look around for the check-out link..

Always provide next-action links to keep the flow going and to ensure you don't lose the attention of potential customers. Next-action links can direct the visitor to a page with more information about the product or to the actual page where they can make the purchase or sign up. These links could read something like: "Ready to order? Click here," "Learn more," "Take the tour" or "Shop now."

Don't leave a dead end on any page: always suggest to your visitors where they should go next.

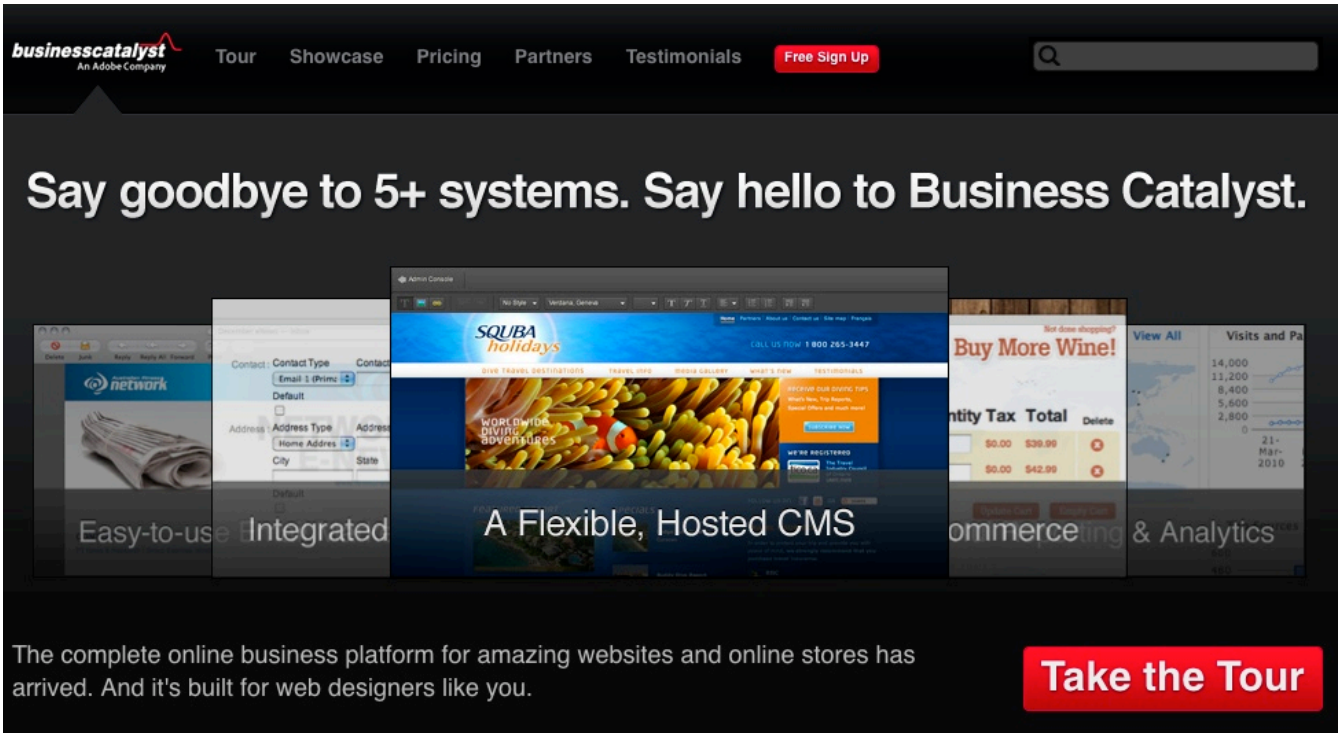
8. The Gutenberg rule

The Gutenberg diagram (or the Gutenberg rule) is a concept that maps out something called reading gravity. Reading gravity describes a habit of reading in the western world: left to right, top to bottom. The Gutenberg diagram splits up a page into four quadrants: the “Primary Optical Area” in top left, the “Strong Fallow Area” in top right, the “Weak Fallow Area” in the bottom left and a “Terminal Area” in bottom right.



The Gutenberg diagram

It suggests that the bottom left area of the page will get least attention as our eyes scan the page from top left to bottom right and that our glance would end up in the lower right portion of the page. How can we utilize this concept? Buttons and calls to action could be placed in bottom right instead of bottom left, as this is the place where the visitor's glance is likely to alight.



Notice how businesscatalyst has the take the tour button placed at the bottom right

Note that the Gutenberg diagram is more likely to work on pages which have more a balanced distribution of content. If parts of your page have strong highlights through high contrast and bold typography, then those areas would likely attract more attention and so will direct the way a user scans the page.

7 More Useful Tips To Help Your Site Convert

By Dmitry Fadeyev

As we see more and more businesses move their services online, and even more that begin their life on the Web, a greater need arises for websites that are designed and built to sell. A great-looking website may achieve the goal of shaping and delivering a strong brand, but its good looks alone aren't enough to sell the products or services on offer. For that, you need to introduce the element of marketing.

This article presents further principles and rules that will help your site convert. Among other things, we cover A/B testing, footnotes, testimonials, feature lists, the sign-up process and typography.

1. A/B Testing

There is no reason to stop developing your website once you've come up with a design that you're happy with and that you think best sells your product. Practice often differs from theory, and every market is different. Things you believe should work may not actually perform well in your context. This doesn't mean your implementation was completely wrong; perhaps it just needs a little tweaking to achieve its full potential.

You can tweak your website using what's called A/B testing (also known as split testing). Basically, this test pits design A against design B and determines which performs better. This simple test helps you figure out things like, Which headline works better, or Where should you place the "Buy now" button?

Combination	Estimated Conversion Rate Range [?]	Chance to Beat Orig. [?]
Original	17.2% ± 8.4%	—
Combination 11	30.9% ± 13%	89.3%
Combination 5	29.5% ± 12%	87.8%
Combination 9	28.8% ± 10%	88.4%
Combination 6	26.7% ± 9.5%	84.8%
Combination 8	24.4% ± 10%	77.6%
Combination 1	22.4% ± 10%	70.3%
Combination 4	21.6% ± 9.8%	68.1%
Combination 10	20.7% ± 9.2%	65.1%
Combination 7	19.5% ± 9.0%	60.1%
Combination 3	15.1% ± 8.7%	40.2%
Combination 2	11.2% ± 7.0%	22.3%

Google Website Optimizer

Google Website Optimizer is a free tool you can use to perform A/B testing, as well as multivariate testing (testing many combinations of variables), on your website. It's relatively simple to use: all you need to do is provide Google Website Optimizer with the different assets you want to test, and it will randomly load them for your visitors and track which ones lead to better conversions.

2. Footnotes: The Good and the Bad Ones

Sometimes, when writing a description of your service or a product feature, you may need to disclose additional information about things like

availability and price. This extra information can usually be placed in a footnote at the bottom of the page.

This is logical because you want to keep the copy on your main page as slim as possible to ensure people actually read it. If the copy has any extra information that is not relevant to the pitch, then it may break the flow and add needless weight. To add a footnote, just insert a reference number in the main text (using the `sup`-tag), and then place the accompanying explanation at the bottom of the page (the larger the font size, the better).

up.
And while disaster is a great
nagging need to back up has
all happens wirelessly, saving
JONES family
Built for Time Machine.
Time Capsule includes a wireless 500GB or 1TB hard drive* designed to work with Time Machine in Mac OS X Leopard. Just set Time Capsule as the designated backup drive for Time Machine, and that's it. Depending on how much data you have, your initial backup with Time Capsule could take overnight or longer. After it completes, only changed files are backed up — automatically, wirelessly, and in the background. So you never have to worry about backing up again.

A typical feature description on Apple's website. The little asterisk in the first line under the heading "Built for Time Machine" indicates that a technical description is in the footnote.

However, some companies use footnotes for another purpose: instead of hiding superfluous technical details, they trick customers into buying

something, offering services “for free” and referring with footnotes or asterisks to details of the deal. These details are almost always unreadable – because of the font size and the font color – and almost always result in misunderstandings and problems. If you or your company use footnotes for this purpose, you are definitely doing something wrong. Once your users lost trust for your company (for instance, because they purchased something that they didn’t want to buy), it will be damn hard for you to win it back.

The German company T-Mobile offered the iPhone for a sensational price: 1 Euro. Of course, the customer needs to pay attention to little footnotes that explain further costs. This is hidden marketing and disrespectful behavior towards customers.

Conclusion: if you care about your customers and aim to build a solid, long-term relationship with them, you better make sure you communicate with them honestly and directly – and use footnotes properly.

3. Testimonials

Testimonials are great because they tell your visitors that other people use your product and would go as far as recommend it. Testimonials help relieve some of the risk associated with purchasing a new product or service. You have little way of telling whether something is good or not until you try it, and knowing that others have tried it and liked it helps a lot in breaking down this risk barrier.

There are some formatting tricks you can use to make your testimonials more effective. For example, read the following three testimonials:

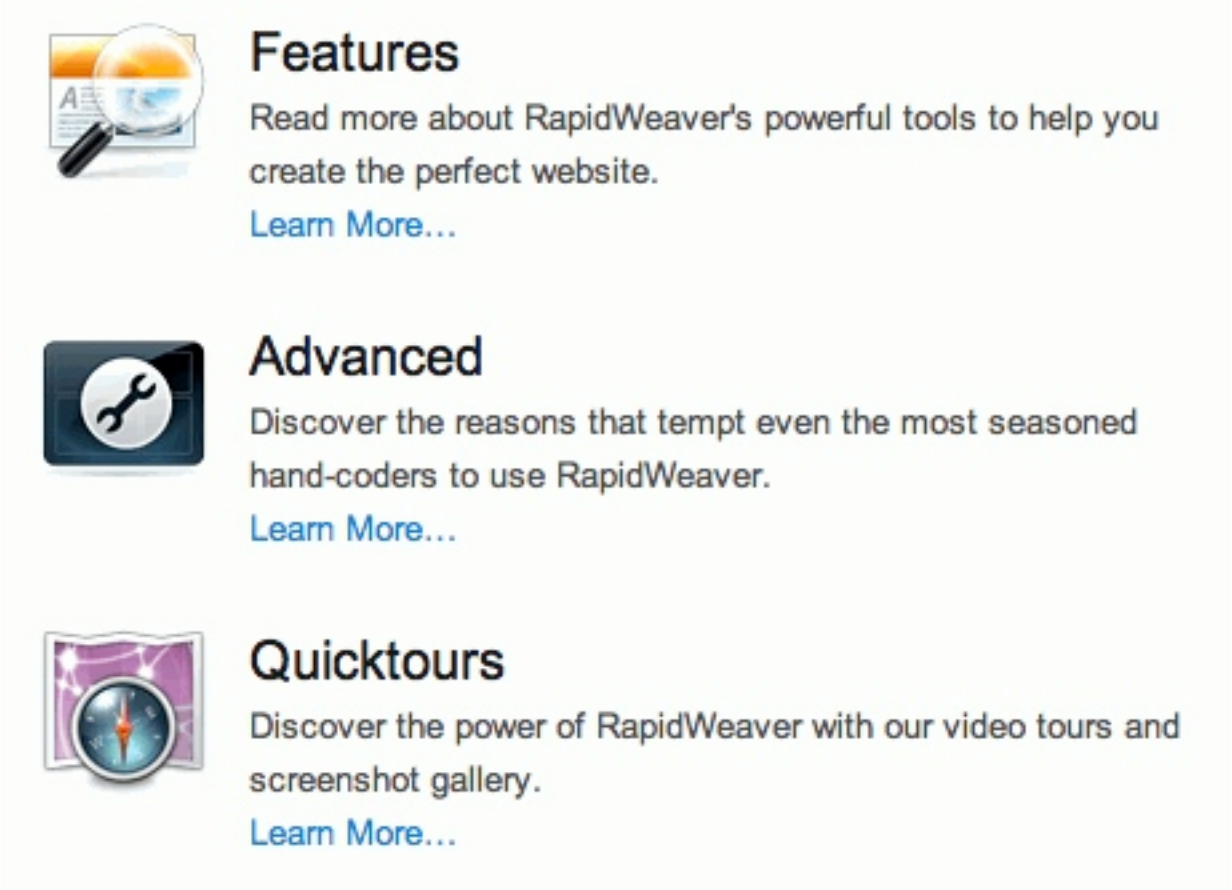
1. I found Product X to be incredibly useful in my daily workflow.
2. "I found Product X to be incredibly useful in my daily workflow."
3. "I found Product X to be incredibly useful in my daily workflow." *John Smith, ACME Corp, New York*

The first testimonial doesn't have anything attached to it — it's just a sentence and so doesn't look very believable. The third one on the other hand has speech marks around it and attribution to the source. Just adding speech marks already makes a testimonial look better. For best testimonials though make sure to add a source.

It's also a good idea to provide readers with case-studies that describe the process of your work and explain how customers liked it, what were the problems and how the service can be useful to solve tasks from the daily routine.

4. Scannable Feature Lists

Your visitors don't have a lot of patience. Why? They're spending their time browsing your website, time that could be spent doing a myriad of other things. Time is money, and people are investing it when they navigate around your website. This means you've got to offer something valuable in return. You must grab their attention and not let go. If they get bored or don't like what you offer, then they will click away and likely be gone forever.


Features
Read more about RapidWeaver's powerful tools to help you create the perfect website.
Learn More…
Advanced
Discover the reasons that tempt even the most seasoned hand-coders to use RapidWeaver.
Learn More…
Quicktours
Discover the power of RapidWeaver with our video tours and screenshot gallery.
Learn More…

Rapidweaver makes its feature list scannable by using white space, headings and images.

To address this, present your information in a way that is easiest and quickest to digest. You've got to slice up your marketing pitch into bite-sized chunks that are fast to read and simple to understand. You may want to give each chunk a heading or highlight areas of the text to stand out. You can also add images, such as an icon next to each chunk of text. All of this makes the text scannable. People are then able to look over the text, pick out headings and read more detailed blurbs about the elements they like.

5. Streamline the Sign-Up Process

Selling has a lot to do with breaking down barriers. These barriers are mainly the objections people imagine to buying your product, but these barriers can also be physical; for example, the sign-up form on your website. Users have to fill in forms, and that means a little work on their part. To ensure you don't lose conversions at this stage, you can do a few things.

First of all, ensure the sign-up form is as short as possible. If a field is optional, it doesn't have to be there. Users can always fill in optional fields later on their settings page. Don't make potential customers do more work than they have to; keep the form nice and short and easy to fill in.

Secondly, to ensure users don't make any mistakes and have to re-fill information, you can validate fields live using AJAX. You could, for example, display a green tick next to each filled-in field when it validates, or display a red cross along with a short error message if some error occurs (such as if a required field is left empty or a user name that is already taken is chosen). This allows people to see any errors as they're filling in the form and fix them before clicking the "Submit" button.

Lastly, you can simplify the page layout of the sign-up form by removing any irrelevant navigation elements. Your objective here is to get the visitor to sign up rather than navigate to other sections of the website, so you can remove any extra navigation to help the user focus on the task at hand.

6. White Space Is Not Lost Space

Have you ever seen those cheap ad booklets one gets in the post, all full of bright colors, big text and pictures, every millimeter used to display a latest offer or new deal. The designers try to fit everything they've got into the booklet and make sure no space is wasted. Cramming everything you've got into a limited amount of space isn't always the best approach, though, and in most cases it's the wrong approach online.

White space, the empty space around and between various pieces of content, is important. It gives your design air to breathe by separating elements. This separation is valuable because it allows people to focus their attention on individual areas of the page, be it the navigation, a feature description or the website's description.

When everything is stuck together, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between its components and thus more difficult to focus on and thus less scannable.

7. Set your type properly

The way you set your type has an effect on how well your copy performs. Good typography can give your copy the punch it needs. Use large font sizes to make headings stand out. If you're selling to an older demographic, ensure all font sizes are large enough to read easily. Small fonts may look great, but if they're difficult to read, they will turn people off. Also, ensure

the text and its background color have enough contrast. Black on white is a good start. Inverted color schemes (light text on dark background) do not work so well in most cases, especially if your audience is used to more traditional media (e.g. newspapers), where black on white is the standard.

To focus people's attention on certain elements, you can decrease the contrast of surrounding elements by using something like dark gray on white (instead of black on white) to fade them out a little. Use stronger contrast for the stuff you want people to notice. One good technique is to use the highest contrast for a feature heading or brief description, and then a lower contrast for the detailed blurb below. The aim here is to make the page scannable: let people glance over it and settle their gaze on the text that's most important and quickest to digest.

Conclusion

Design definitely has a role to play in selling the product or service on your website, though it's more of a support than a lead role. Design should reinforce the copy: help it stand out and be readable. Choose images that send the message you want. Ask yourself what purpose each image on your website has. If it has no purpose, why is it there? Use white space and typography to give your copy punch. At the end of the day, though, you have to make sure your content actually works, because a great design alone won't be enough to close the sale.

Optimizing Conversion Rates: Less Effort, More Customers

By Frank Puscher

Sometimes small changes can have huge effects. Due to conversion rates, which is the proportion of website visitors who submit their contact information or make a purchase, better Web design leads directly to greater revenue.

Most online store designers who want to optimize their conversion rates only concentrate on the "inner" part of the shopping process, the sales funnel. They focus on product pages, the shopping cart and check-out process. This is good, but not necessarily sufficient. It is equally important that advertisements convert – just as the simple fact that users find the URL and that both (ads and URLs) perfectly fit the image conveyed by the landing page. Sound practices make for the most successful conversions.

There are thousands of tips and tricks for increasing conversion rates. There are various marketing techniques that aim at simplifying the purchasing and the checkout processes. This article is the first part of a 3-part-series "Optimizing Conversion Rates" that covers most important strategies and techniques that will help you boost your conversion rate. The first article deals with "proper" advertising, building up trust and credibility and the handling of shipping costs.

Create Suitable Ads

Let's look at traffic coming from an online advertising campaign. This is traffic you can directly influence by changing content, display frequency and display location.

Relevance

The key to good ad performance is relevance. And the most important key to relevance is "negative selection." Look at the platform your ad is running on, for instance, Google. Are there users on that platform who would want nothing to do with your product? Are there keywords people would use in a search that might mislead to your website? Use negative selection to filter visitors to whom your products are not targeted to. This mechanism will work as a magnet for more relevant visitors.

A good example is local content. If you have a car repair garage located in Birmingham, England, you should include this location, because users from London would be less likely to become customers. What's more: If irrelevant users click on your ad, they will cost you PPC fees and lower your score in Google's ranking.

Connection between a search term and an ad

A second and very important criterion is to establish a strong connection between a search term and your ad. A search term can tell you a lot about a user's search context. And your ad has to address that context by delivering the right answers.

To start, simply divide your audience into at least two segments:

- Novices who know very little about your product, your company or even the industry. You will have to explain your product to these users.
- Experts who search for the exact differences between your and your competitors' products.

Now analyze the keywords you have chosen. Divide them in two groups, and develop two or more variants of your ads that respond to the needs of each of these audiences.

The same applies to display advertising. The more generic the host page (whether a portal, home page or navigational page), the more basic the information your users will need. This applies as much to the content of your ad as to its graphical elements.

And the ad alone must not only demonstrate relevance to your visitor. Your landing page must meet users' expectations as well. Both your landing page and ad should work as an informational unit. A not-so-savvy novice who is looking for a solid MP3-player may be interested in the battery life and price, while an expert may want to know full technical details such as the technology used, available ports, advanced features or maybe the coolness of the design.

To sum up, relevance is probably the most important criterion for successful conversion. This separates good communication from inefficient communication. Even the location or size of your company can be relevant if users fear that their order may not be delivered on time, intact or at all. Simple page elements like a photo of your company's building or storage depot can do a lot for credibility.

Build Up Trust And Credibility

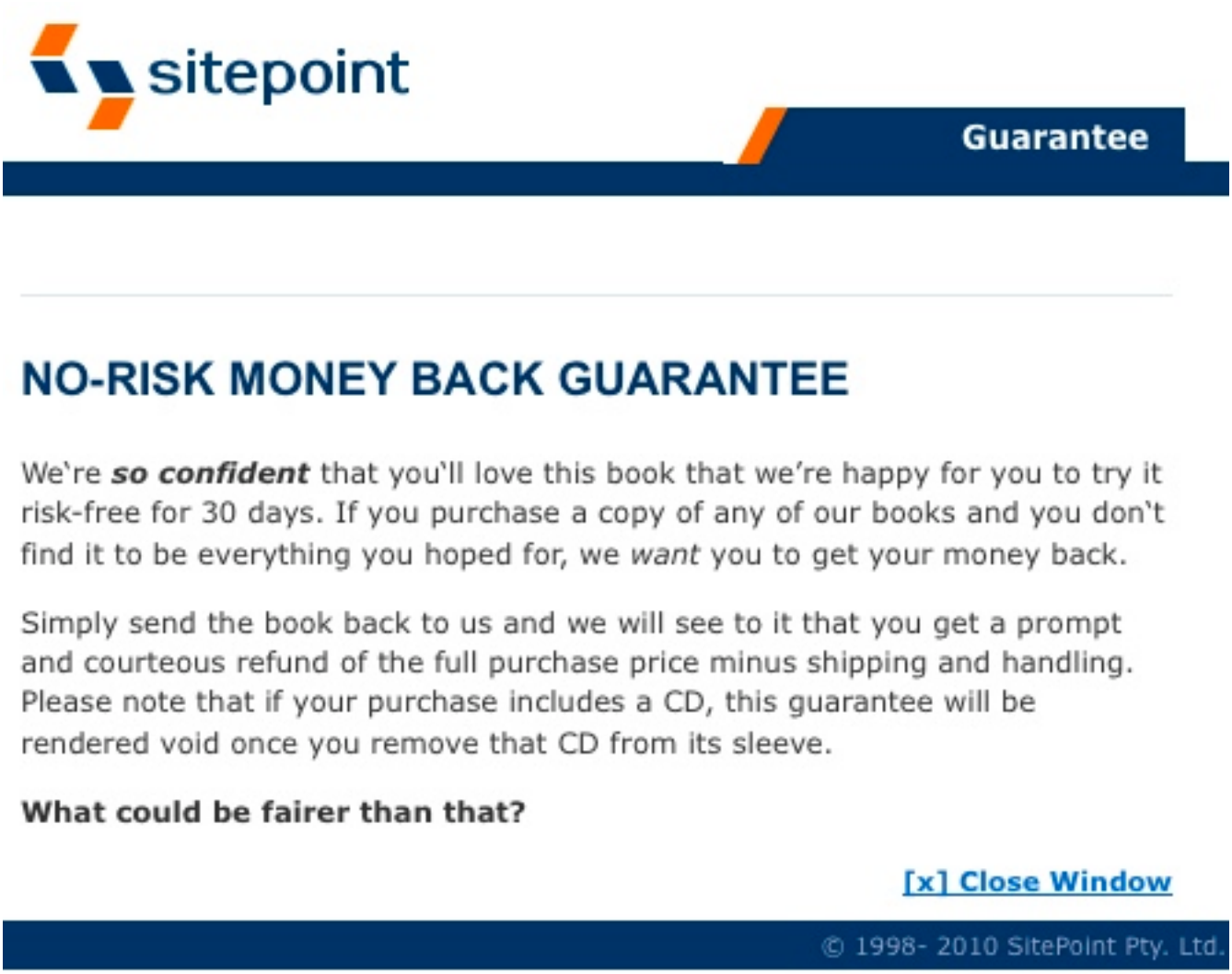
You may already know this, but there is something deeper than just relevancy. Sales can be lost if a potential customer decides to ignore certain sellers or certain kinds of sellers. This even holds true for retailers selling on eBay or by posting ads on Google. Some people mistrust eBay sellers in general.

Consider the payment method, for instance. Most eBay sellers use prepayment, which is very convenient for the seller, but may scare away the potential customer. In a study by the Foresee Institute, researchers found out that only 49% of Internet users in the US are willing to use native online payment methods like PayPal and Google Checkout

This distrust of transmitting sensitive payment data and of integrated security systems in general is a good lesson in what it takes to build trust.

Money-back guarantee

Money-back guarantees can make a purchase easier, even when mistrust or uncertainty have a significant impact on the customer's decision making. Offering your customers such a guarantee, you build up the feeling of trust and comfort, making it easier for users to actually purchase a product. In Europe money-back guarantees are required by law, so many European companies use it as a sound marketing argument in their campaigns.


sitepoint
Guarantee
NO-RISK MONEY BACK GUARANTEE
We're so confident that you'll love this book that we're happy for you to try it risk-free for 30 days. If you purchase a copy of any of our books and you don't find it to be everything you hoped for, we want you to get your money back.
Simply send the book back to us and we will see to it that you get a prompt and courteous refund of the full purchase price minus shipping and handling. Please note that if your purchase includes a CD, this guarantee will be rendered void once you remove that CD from its sleeve.
What could be fairer than that?
[x] Close Window
© 1998- 2010 SitePoint Pty. Ltd.

Sitepoint promises a no-risk money-back guarantee for its books. That's fair, honest and sounds trustworthy. It may also be a good idea to add the "money-back guarantee" into the shopping cart by default, so they are packaged in warm feelings, making it a central focus of users.

These considerations may help you to build up a trustworthy environment for your customers, but they alone will not necessarily be able to make a difference. In fact, trust and credibility have a subtler, more emotional dimension.

A professional design is necessary to differentiate your business from that of amateurs and students who sell out of their grandma's living room. How about showing photos of your team members? Tell your customers your story, create a relationship with them, show them your "human touch" by talking with them honestly. Provide your customers with e-mail addresses of the team, phone numbers, and, of course, e-mails – that's another sign of confidence. And, of course, if you have excellent user recommendations on eBay, LinkedIn or any price comparison websites, you can display those, too. And you should!

Don't Push The Customer Away With Shipping Costs

This is almost the same point as the one about money-back guarantees, but a bit more nuanced. Too many sellers have abused their customers trust by hiding shipping costs to generate extra revenue. This has now become obvious to most users. It's not just about the added costs; it's about fooling customers.

The aforementioned Foresee study analyzed 10,500 shopping transactions in 30 online stores. By far the most important feature that significantly improved the conversion rate was the simple fact that a seller didn't charge any shipping costs; it was the decisive factor for 34% of all users.

There are two reasons for this. First, when shipping charges aren't added later, users will know the final price of their order early in the shopping process, maybe even when they see the online ad. For you as a seller it means that you remove the barrier between user's decision to buy a product for a given price and his confusion about the "final" price during the checkout procedure.

Secondly, the price is more “transparent” and users can easier decide if they are interested or not; besides, they can also easier compare a product with other products. The customer not only compares online stores but also compares online stores to the “real” ones. Purchasing from a real store can sometimes be faster than doing it online, and no shipping costs can certainly compensate for that.

Sometimes, particularly if the seller is shipping worldwide, delivery costs can not be avoided. In these situations make sure that the available shipping options are clear, transparent and easy to understand. The customer came to you to purchase a product, not to spend minutes on decrypting the complex costs matrix. Consider the following two examples (screenshots below). The more complicated a shipping costs table is, the more likely a user is to cancel the checkout process and look for alternatives. Even a tiny doubt or confusion can completely change customers’ decision, so you better do a good job of making it easier for them to finish the checkout process.

Delivery conditions				
Type of delivery	**Germany**	**EU**	**within Europa**	**outside Europa**
UPS Standard	For orders made before 12.00 *) Delivery within 3-5 working days to centers of commerce 6,50 € (from at 250,- € free of charge **)	For orders made before 12.00 *) Delivery within 3-5 working days to centers of commerce 30% Discount based on UPS price list (from at 500 € free of charge)	For orders made before 12.00 *) Economic delivery Optimum transit time ***) 30% Discount based on UPS price list	
UPS Expedited				For orders made before 12.00 *) Economic delivery Optimum transit time ***) 30% Discount based on UPS price list
UPS Express Saver	For orders made before 12.00 *) Delivery by next working day before 12.00 30% Discount based on UPS price list	For orders made before 12.00 *) Delivery by next working day 30% Discount based on UPS price list	For orders made before 12.00 *) Fast economical delivery. Please check exact transit time at www.ups.com 30% Discount based on UPS price list	For orders made before 12.00 *) Fast economical delivery. Please check exact transit time at www.ups.com 30% Discount based on UPS price list
UPS Express	For orders made before 12.00 *) Delivery by next working day before 10.30**) 30% Discount based on UPS price list	For orders made before 12.00 *) Delivery by next working day before 12.00 to centers of commerce 30% Discount based on UPS price list	For orders made before 12.00 *) Fast economic delivery. Please check exact transit time at www.ups.com 30% Discount based on UPS price list	For orders made before 12.00 *) Fast economic delivery. Please check exact transit time at www.ups.com 30% Discount based on UPS price list
UPS Express Plus	For orders made before 12.00 *) Delivery by next working day before 8.30 **)	For orders made before 12.00 *) Delivery by next working day before 9.00 to centers of commerce		

This isn't helpful for customers: a complex overview of shipping terms and costs on [Badgepoint](#).

However, if free shipping is a viable option in your business, you may want to try it out, since it may significantly boost your conversion rate. Of course, free shipping is not really "free shipping," at least not for the retailer. But there are some strategies that can be adopted: a minimum order price or value, for example. But do not block the user from ordering if this minimum is not reached. Add a shipping cost and call it a "Small-order fee." Inform the user clearly how much more they will need to purchase to qualify for free shipping.

Another idea: how about offering users free shipping on their first transaction? You could look at it as an investment to gather their registration data. Or specify a certain time frame in which customers can redeem the free shipping offer and state it on the ad. The technique is similar to issuing coupons for in-store shopping, and it puts more pressure on the customer – but in a positive, money-saving way.

You simply have to calculate how much more overall revenue you can generate by dropping shipping costs. Try it out – you won't be disappointed!

Optimizing Conversion Rates: It's All About Usability

By Frank Puscher

In e-commerce usability improvements usually have a huge impact on conversion rates. However, usability doesn't only mean better visual guide or better site hierarchy. It also means a better communication with potential customers using a professional, trustworthy design, delivering the right information at the right time and communicating with users instead of throwing ad-slogans at them.

In this article you'll learn what to consider when preparing a perfect landing page for your product, how to focus user's attention on the most important parts of your sites and also how you can use videos and user ratings to improve your conversion rates.

Professional Design Builds Trust

The most important rule for website usability is to keep it simple. Make your links speak for themselves. Make the structure of your website predictable. Provide clear and visible feedback. Comfort your visitors and make it hard for them to do serious mistakes.

However, while these (quite obvious) guidelines may help your readers to get a solid understanding of how your site works, they will not necessarily lead to more sales. Besides, you may have some goals that conflict with this paradigm of simplicity, the most important of which are probably up-selling and cross-selling.

Build Trust and Credibility

When it comes to building customer's trust in your company, a professional, trustworthy design becomes crucial. In the Web, people are very likely to mistrust online-business, so you better make sure that you appear credible and serious. *Inkd.com* does just that with a professional look, a solid grid-based layout and following classic usability conventions.

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Templates
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Sell
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Custom Logos, Creative Templates, Presentations & Printing!
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Plastic Business Cards.
Opaque white or semi-transparent frosted make a lasting impression.
Print Plastic Cards
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Time Left To Save
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New! Plastic cards are here!
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Our elegant linen business cards have a unique fabric pattern that looks and feels exclusive.
Satin Business Cards!
You have to feel our satin business cards to really appreciate them. 16pt stock with a luxurious silk coating.
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Inkd.com

For everything you do on your website, keep in mind that the user always has to be in control of what's happening. This holds true for expert users, who will use your internal search to quickly access products they are interested in. They may want to be able to filter search results in a certain way. And it holds equally true for the new users, who wants to see proof of the teasers on your home page and will likely use your primary menu to navigate.

When a user is attracted to the advertising campaign of a product, you have no alternative but to lead that user directly to the product page itself. The next click after that should lead the user directly to the purchase page. By the way, why should you use a shopping cart in this case, if the user wants to buy only one product? The cart becomes totally useless and creates more steps in the sales process. With each additional step, the risk of cart abandonment increases.

The rule of thumbs: if a user finds a product through your internal search engine, he or she shouldn't have to click more than twice to find essential information about the product.

Deliver the right information at the right time

Speaking of good information, another important rule for leaving users in control is delivering the right information at the right time, whether the information is related to the product, shipping, credit card security risks, privacy or what have you. Because of the large amount of information you can deliver to the user, you need to sort it by priority.

Tweetie
FOR MAC
Tweetie 2
FOR IPHONE
Scribbles
SIMPLE DRAWING FOR MAC
features
reviews
screencasts
gallery
buy Scribbles for only $19.95
Buying a license for Scribbles will disable that annoying watermark on exported images (and the reminder window that pops up every time you start the program).
You can use any major credit card or PayPal to pay. Be sure to type in a valid email* address, because that's where your license keys for Scribbles will be sent.
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System requirements:
G4, G5 or Intel Mac.
Mac OS X 10.4 or 10.5.
Mac
Universal
CoreImage capable graphics card recommended (but not required) for full compatibility.
MacUser
BUY NOW
PayPal
Involved in education?
*note: we promise to keep your personal information, including your email address completely private, and we'll never send you any spam.

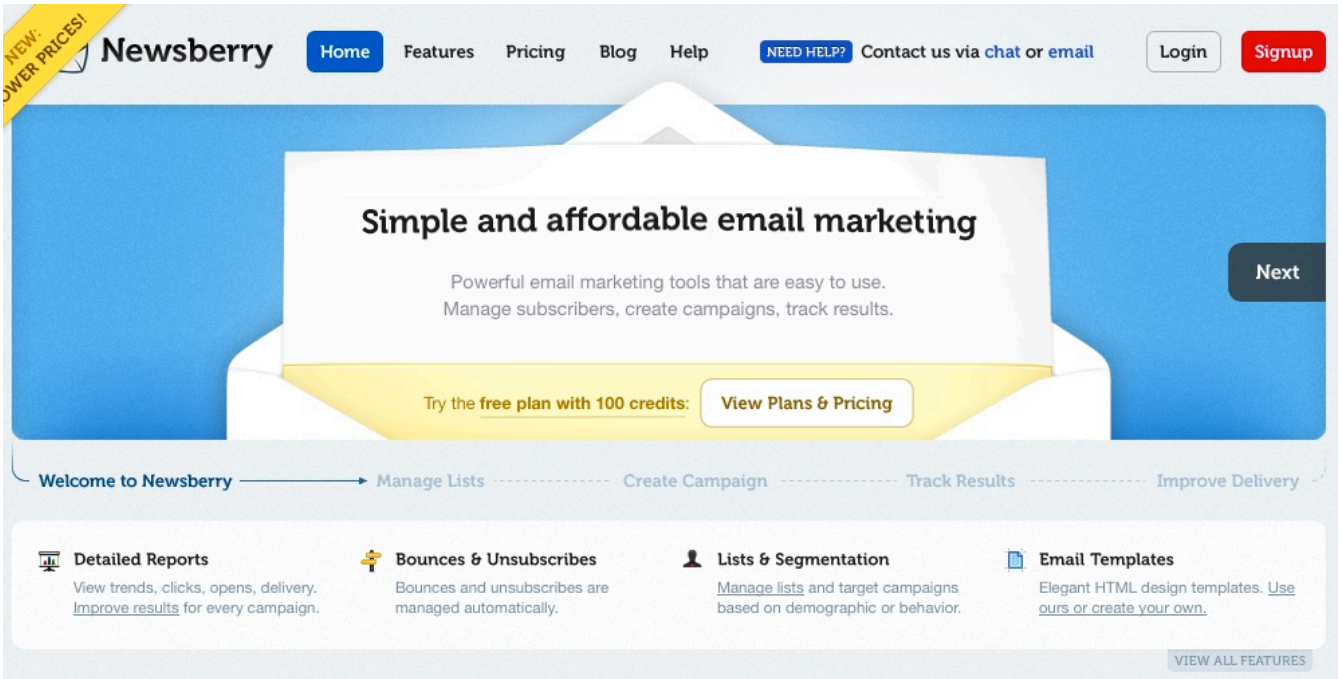
Delivering the right information at the right time is important. Scribbles: before users type in any data, the site informs them about payment methods, privacy and purchase opportunities for educational purposes. However, both privacy data and the "education"-link could be given more visual weight on the page.

The user will have certain questions at each stage of the shopping process; focus on the answers to these questions, and make them the most prominent on the page at that time. Additional useful information can be "hidden" behind a hyperlink (as the "education" link in the Scribble-example above).

Don’t advertise, lead the users

Be careful about using graphic elements to prioritize information; don’t make them look like advertisements. People tend to overlook page elements that look like ads. Of course, you can illustrate the advantages of your products with big pictures — really big pictures. Jakob Nielsen even recommends using full-screen-sized views: “If I click on a product image on a product page, I am certainly asking for a bigger version of that image. And as I intentionally clicked, I’m able to wait for the really great picture. I’m not only able to but I even expect to wait for some loading delay.”

The paradigm of simplicity means that store designers have to be very careful experimenting with new techniques such as AJAX and rich Internet applications based on Flash. If you use these, you will have to run usability tests. New studies show that many people are still unfamiliar with functions like dragging and dropping and do not know what words like “tagging” mean.



Newsberry

Newsberry uses a beautiful layout with attractive design elements. However, it fails to attract readers to sign up for the service immediately – users need time to find the obscure, modest "sign up"-button. How much time do you need to find it? Probably making the button stand out would work better in this case.

Mark Boulton's Five Simple Steps does a good job of focusing users' attention to purchasing options while not making them look like advertisements. Clear visual design and layout reinforce the sales funnel effect.

Getting back to the questions that customers pose, one of their big questions on landing pages is, "What next?" Take a look around the Web. You'll find tons of stores that hide their order buttons or label them with ambiguous terms. For example, the German store *Werbemittelguide* includes the terms "Order or ask for an offer" on a single button. Placing these two different ideas on one button is confusing, while distinguishing between direct orders and solicited offers gives users more control. In this particular case, clicking on the button does nothing other than put the product in your cart. And the cart is positioned in the bottom-left corner: a clear violation of user expectations.

Highlight What's Important And Use Proper Wording

Go to the website www.guut.de, look for a second and then close your eyes. Open them again for a second and then close again. What did you notice? The big product picture on the left? The countdown? The huge orange order button? The label on the button says "Order now" — a couple of years ago, a lot of Web designers would have regarded that as outrageous, outdated design. Today, it's state of the art.

"Tell people clearly what they should do next," says US e-commerce expert Peter Blackshaw. What works with online shopping also holds true for online communication or downloading a PDF brochure. Make the most important option the biggest. Links to "More information," "Details" and "Technical data" are also important, but less important than the conversion itself. They should be displayed in a smaller font or in less aggressive colors.

The US agency *MarketingExperiments* learned first-hand how strongly wording can influence conversion rates. It tested its own campaign, which aims to convert readers to paid subscribers. Every single element of the email campaign was tested. The button that triggered conversions was labeled "Continue here," which at first glance would seem to work perfectly. The outcome of the test surprised even experienced experts. A new button labeled "Continue to article" converted 3.3% better than the first; and a third version, labeled "Click to continue," convinced almost 10% more users.

Childrens Gadgets, Miscellaneous Gadgets
Moshi Monsters – Online game meets cell phone accessory
Buy now!
by Julie - on November 25, 2010

After inserting an Amazon-style order button, Al Carlton doubled sales on his website.

Video Is Often A Silver Bullet

It is becoming common sense for product descriptions and product pages to include videos that show the products in action. In Germany, almost 60% of all retailers surveyed by the BVDW indicated that they planned to increase their efforts with video.

The bike retailer *Fahrrad.de* invited sales agents from all brands to its new studio, which was built solely for producing videos for its website. The sales agents were advised to explain why their products were better than others. And most brands sent not only sales people but also cross-country world champions to stand in front of the camera. Some retailers might argue that their products are not suited to online video. By now, though, we can quickly find many products that are being advertised with online videos.

What is very important to understand is that the videos don't have to be full-throttle studio productions with enormous budgets. In many cases a hand-made personal video will do. It may even perform better than a traditional advertising video because it's more honest. Websites that push new concepts, like *eBags.com*, try to build community websites around their product videos, and users can vote on which video they like best.

A very nice idea was used by *Pleo*, a company that sells a kind of robot pet that looks like a dinosaur. *Pleo* hit the sidewalks in certain cities, put the dinosaurs on the ground and shot people's reactions. You could hardly advertise with more authenticity.

Don’t Underestimate The Importance Of User Ratings And Customers Reviews

This may be one of the most important topics of all these days. In tourism, about 60% of all travelers base their decisions on online research. They visit ratings websites to find the best destinations and hotels, free from the marketing overtures of the companies themselves. Similar websites can be found in the electronics and other industries.

This leads us to two questions:

1. Should store owners build their own ratings system?
2. How should one deal with criticism?

The first answer is pretty simple. In most cases the answer is, “No.” And there are a lot of reasons for that. The most important reason is that no retailer is trustworthy in this way. People would know that commercial interests are behind any recommendation; the cost and effort to maintain such systems are immense; and only the biggest websites attract enough users to build a valuable rating system. If a website owner decides to build his own system, he must provide the ratings right in the spot where users expect it: beside the products.

Take Thomas Cook Travel as an example. After a lot of research, it built its own user ratings system, which is now one major filter in its internal search. An external system like *Idealo.de* or *PriceGrabber.com* might be a better alternative. Idealo gathers ratings from a lot of platforms and aggregates them with tests and reviews from websites and magazines. The platform itself is neutral because individual retailers cannot influence the content.

pricegrabber
Smart Shopping Anytime Anywhere
Your
Clothing
Indoor Living
Electronics
Toys
Computers
Appliances
Health & Beauty
Cameras
Sporting Goods
Furniture
Best Electronic Products
Reviews & Ratings
Rebates
Merchant Coupons
I'M SHOPPING FOR
ipod touch
IN
Electronics
lectronics › Portable Media › MP3 Players
Ad
Apple iPod touch 3rd Generation 8GB Flash Portable Media Player
Audio Player, Video Player, Photo Viewer, Camera - 3.5" Colour LCD - 8GB Flash Memory - Black - MPN: MC086LLA -
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New(2 Sellers from $199.00) | Used & Refurbished(1 Seller for $193.99)
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Check Local Availability
Shipping costs are based on an estimate of UPS ground or equivalent carrier within the contiguous US, excluding Alaska and Hawaii. Please see Seller's website for actual shipping costs.
PriceGrabber works hard to improve your online shopping experience every day. If you notice inconsistencies in our product information, we encourage you to notify us of any issues by clicking here.

PriceGrabber.com

The second question, how one should deal with criticism, is also easily answered, but the consequences are significant. When criticism comes its way, a company would do well to leave it on its system, as long as it isn't obscene and doesn't violate laws. This is what experts recommend. It is a very sensitive issue for retailers, their suppliers, the producers and brands, all of whom are trying to cooperate for mutual benefit. If you face this kind of criticism, forward it to the relevant partner and allow them to respond.

Use Conversions To Generate More Conversions

By Frank Puscher

If you've managed to sell a product to a customer, use this opportunity to present further attractive offers to the customer. The "behavioral targeting" is a technique that uses information collected on an individual's web-browsing behavior, such as the pages they have visited or the searches they have made, to select which advertisements to display to that customers. Many advertisers believe that this technique can dramatically help to boost the conversion rate.

Behavioral targeting is probably currently the most discussed advertising strategy. However, it is not clear if it possible to derive some meaningful customers' preferences and future behavior out of the earlier purchasing history. Wrong adjustments – based upon the browsing history – can significantly decrease the conversion rate as well.

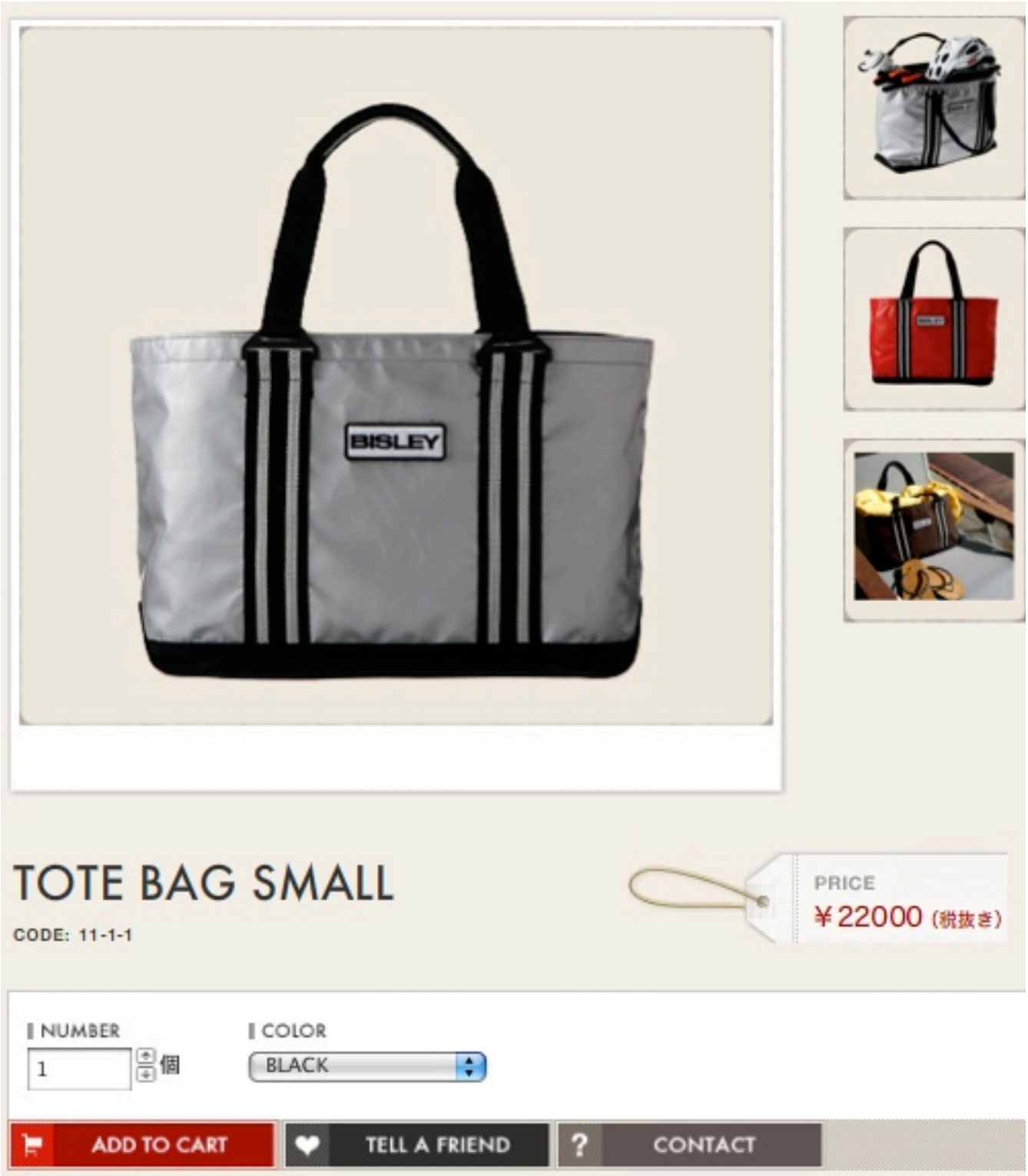
Since you are the owner of an online-store, it's much easier for you: you don't have to try to decrypt some general user's behavior – you can use the concrete data that you've collected so far instead. After a purchase your customer has clearly stated his preferences and you have collected some data about him and his interests. And, more importantly, if the delivery of the item didn't cause any problems, you have gained his or her trust. You can use this advantage to better bind your customers to your company. And this is where personalization becomes important.

Personalization Without "Big Brother": Keep The Requirements As Low As Possible

If you are not able to convince your users to buy your store items immediately, you need some tools that would develop what marketers call "stickiness". The latter sees users returning to you within a short period of time and favoring your store over others. Again it's all about increasing relevancy.

While behavioral targeting works indirectly, lots of other personalization methods work more directly in their attempt to better understand customers' needs and interests. An easy way to do this is to implement a shopping cart that would store user sessions. Configurations could also be stored, as could previous product comparisons. Being able to print these personalized data sheets might also be beneficial; people who are simply researching products may have different needs than those ready to make a purchase.

Whatever you do, keep the requirements as low as possible. Tell visitors that their preferences have been saved in a browser cookie, but perhaps don't go quite so far as to restore an abandoned shopping cart. It would be very important for families to be aware of this lack of privacy. For example, two adults buying Christmas presents for each other might use the same PC. Privacy doesn't just mean PC privacy; it means personal privacy.



Not only does Perfectorder.jp allow its visitors to add items to the shopping cart, they can also send an inquiry or ask the customers support for additional information – of course, no registration is necessary. That's user-friendly.

Any form of personalization starts with a basic registration, that is with an email address and password. That is learned behavior and doesn't do much harm. Intelligent systems use this first conversion to immediately trigger a second conversion. They could use it to send out a discount coupon that customers may only be able to redeem by revealing more personal information.

Make Use Of The Neglected Thank-You Page

As mentioned above, the time after a conversion is the best time for the next one. If a user finally made a decision to buy an item and finished the checkout process, he or she already agreed with your payment and delivery methods. This is why this is the perfect time to prepare the customer for the next purchase.

You have already collected important data from the user and earned the user's trust. It is truly interesting that not many online stores use a proper thank-you page, the page that users are redirected to upon checking out. The Thank you page is the perfect place to advertise a newsletter. Advertising is the key: tell your customers what value they can get by disclosing their email address.

You can also use this opportunity to trigger an attractive marketing trick. How about a countdown, let's say 60 minutes, and promising free shipping for all orders completed within that time frame? You could provide the readers with a peek at next weeks' hot sales or suggest some special offers or sales. You could mention products that other customers have bought in addition to the one just purchased. You could offer a coupon for an upcoming sale. You could lead customers to the members area, inviting them to store their shipping address so that their next purchase is easier.

Good Service Is The Best Viral Marketing

Of course, you need to offer your products at competitive prices, otherwise your shop-optimization is in vain. If you do have reasonable prices, the principles and guidelines listed in the last three articles are very likely to improve customers' user experience and boost your conversion rates.

To improve your position against your competitors, you need to make sure that you provide a good product description or offer a better fulfillment service. The first one depends on the branding and the quality of the products that you offer; the latter one has an enormous impact on the reputation of your store.

If you are providing a good service for a long period of time, you'll be able to reap the benefits of the so-called "cognitive relief" – the latter describes the phenomenon when a user, being a loyal and satisfied customer for a more-or-less long period of time, starts to ignore alternative choices and returns to your store over and over again, believing that she found the right one – the one that perfectly fits their needs and provides a really good service. It is very likely that these users also spread or initiate the word of mouth advertising which brings you even more customers in a long run.

Bottom line: whatever optimization methods you are using, you should never compromise your quality of service and the performance of your store. The more responsive you are, the less reasons your customers will have to switch retailers. If you need a reason for Amazon's success, this is it.

Make sure your customers know exactly what stage they're at in the purchasing process. Allow them to track their order. Encourage them to rate your store, leave a testimonial or recommend the store to their friends. And of course don't forget the social media. There is no better viral marketing technique than a plain old good quality service.

The Ultimate Guide To A/B Testing

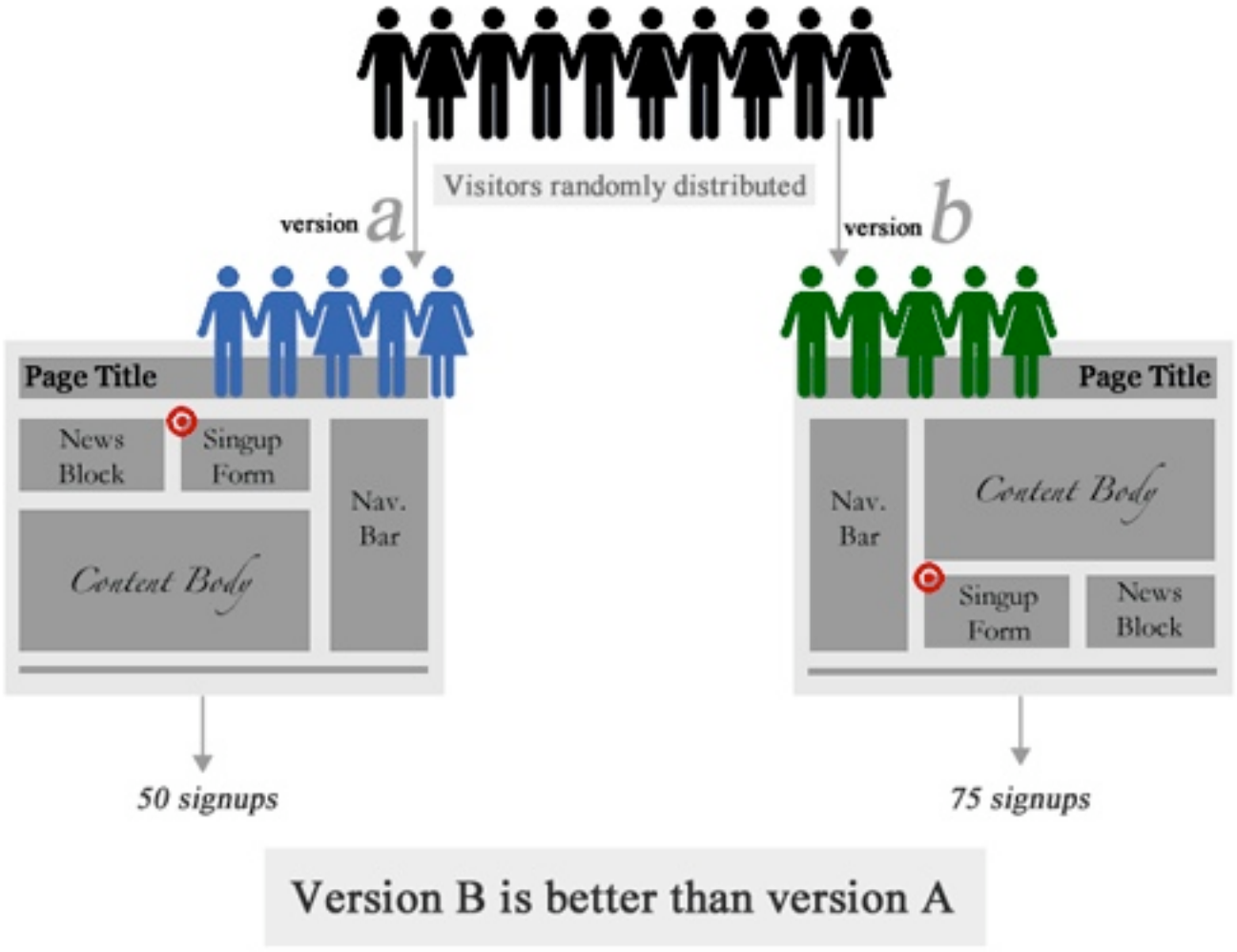
By Paras Chopra

A/B testing isn't a buzz term. A lot of savvy marketers and designs are using it right now to gain insight into visitor behavior and to increase conversion rate. And yet A/B testing is still not as common as such Internet marketing subjects as SEO, Web analytics and usability. People just aren't as aware of it. They don't completely understand what it is or how it could benefit them or how they should use it. This article is meant to be the best guide you will ever need for A/B testing.

What Is A/B Testing?

At its core, A/B testing is exactly what it sounds like: you have two versions of an element (A and B) and a metric that defines success. To determine which version is better, you subject both versions to experimentation simultaneously. In the end, you measure which version was more successful and select that version for real-world use.

This is similar to the experiments you did in Science 101. Remember the experiment in which you tested various substances to see which supports plant growth and which suppresses it. At different intervals, you measured the growth of plants as they were subjected to different conditions, and in the end you tallied the increase in height of the different plants.



A/B testing on the Web is similar. You have two designs of a website: A and B. Typically, A is the existing design (called the control), and B is the new design. You split your website traffic between these two versions and measure their performance using metrics that you care about (conversion rate, sales, bounce rate, etc.). In the end, you select the version that performs best.

What To Test?

Your choice of what to test will obviously depend on your goals. For example, if your goal is to increase the number of sign-ups, then you might test the following: length of the sign-up form, types of fields in the form, display of privacy policy, "social proof," etc. The goal of A/B testing in this case is to figure out what prevents visitors from signing up. Is the form's length intimidating? Are visitors concerned about privacy? Or does the website do a bad job of convincing visitors to sign up? All of these questions can be answered one by one by testing the appropriate website elements.

Even though every A/B test is unique, certain elements are usually tested:

- The call to action's (i.e. the button's) wording, size, color and placement,
- Headline or product description,
- Form's length and types of fields,
- Layout and style of website,
- Product pricing and promotional offers,
- Images on landing and product pages,
- Amount of text on the page (short vs. long).

Create Your First A/B Test

Once you've decided what to test, the next step, of course, is to select a tool for the job. If you want a free basic tool and don't mind fiddling with HTML and JavaScript, go with *Google Website Optimizer*. If you want an easier alternative with extra features, go with *Visual Website Optimizer*.

Other options are available, which I discuss at the end of this article. Setting up the core test is more or less similar for all tools, so we can discuss it while remaining tool-agnostic.

You can set up an A/B test in one of two ways:

- **Replace the element to be tested before the page loads**
  If you are testing a single element on a Web page—say, the sign-up button—then you'll need to create variations of that button (in HTML) in your testing tool. When the test is live, the A/B tool will randomly replace the original button on the page with one of the variations before displaying the page to the visitor.
- **Redirect to another page**
  If you want to A/B test an entire page—say, a green theme vs. a red theme—then you'll need to create and upload a new page on your website. For example, if your home page is `http://www.example.com/index.html`, then you'll need to create a variation located at `http://www.example.com/index1.html`. When the test runs, your tool will redirect some visitors to one of your alternate URLs.

Once you have set up your variations using one of these two methods, the next step is to set up your conversion goal. Typically, you will get a piece of JavaScript code, which you would copy and paste onto a page that would represent a successful test were a visitor to arrive there. For example, if you have an e-commerce store and you are testing the color of the "Buy now" button, then your conversion goal would be the "Thank you" page that is displayed to visitors after they complete a purchase.

As soon as a conversion event occurs on your website, the A/B testing tool records the variation that was shown to the visitor. After a sufficient number of visitors and conversions, you can check the results to find out which variation drove the most conversions. That's it! Setting up and running an A/B test is indeed quite simple.

Do's And Don'ts

Even though A/B testing is super-simple in concept, keep some practical things in mind. These suggestions are a result of my real-world experience of doing many A/B tests (read: making numerous mistakes).

Don'ts

- When doing A/B testing, never ever wait to test the variation until after you've tested the control. Always test both versions simultaneously. If you test one version one week and the second the next, you're doing it wrong. It's possible that version B was actually worse but you just happened to have better sales while testing it. Always split traffic between two versions.
- Don't conclude too early. There is a concept called "statistical confidence" that determines whether your test results are significant (that is, whether you should take the results seriously). It prevents you from reading too much into the results if you have only a few conversions or visitors for each variation. Most A/B testing tools report statistical confidence, but if you are testing manually, consider accounting for it with an online calculator.

- Don't surprise regular visitors. If you are testing a core part of your website, include only new visitors in the test. You want to avoid shocking regular visitors, especially because the variations may not ultimately be implemented.
- Don't let your gut feeling overrule test results. The winners in A/B tests are often surprising or unintuitive. On a green-themed website, a stark red button could emerge as the winner. Even if the red button isn't easy on the eye, don't reject it outright. Your goal with the test is a better conversion rate, not aesthetics, so don't reject the results because of your arbitrary judgment.

Do's

- Know how long to run a test before giving up. Giving up too early can cost you because you may have gotten meaningful results had you waited a little longer. Giving up too late isn't good either, because poorly performing variations could cost you conversions and sales. Use a calculator to determine exactly how long to run a test before giving up.
- Show repeat visitors the same variations. Your tool should have a mechanism for remembering which variation a visitor has seen. This prevents blunders, such as showing a user a different price or a different promotional offer.
- Make your A/B test consistent across the whole website. If you are testing a sign-up button that appears in multiple locations, then a visitor should see the same variation everywhere. Showing one variation on page 1 and another variation on page 2 will skew the results.

- Do many A/B tests. Let’s face it: chances are, your first A/B test will turn out a lemon. But don’t despair. An A/B test can have only three outcomes: no result, a negative result or a positive result. The key to optimizing conversion rates is to do a ton of A/B tests, so that all positive results add up to a huge boost to your sales and achieved goals.

Multivariate Testing: 5 Simple Steps to Increase Conversion Rates

By Paras Chopra

The attention span on the Web has been decreasing ever since Google had arrived and changed the rules of the game. Now with millions of results available on any topic imaginable, the window to grab a visitor's attention has decreased significantly. Picture yourself browsing the Web: do you go out of your way to read the text, look at all the graphics, and try to thoroughly understand what the page is about? The answer is most likely to be a straight "no." With bombardment of information from all around, we have become spoiled kids, not paying enough attention to what a Web page wants to tell us.

We make snap decisions on whether to engage with a website based on whatever we can make out in the first few (milli)seconds. The responsibility for making a good first impression lies with designers and website owners. Given that the window of opportunity to persuade a visitor is really small, most designs do a sub-optimal job because the designer in you thinks in terms of aesthetics. However, most websites do not exist just to impress visitors. Most websites exist to make a sale. Whether it is to get visitors to subscribe to the blog feed, or to download a trial, every website ultimately exists to make a sale of some kind.

In this article we will talk about how to tweak a website for generating more sales, downloads, membership (or any other business goal) in a scientific manner, using A/B split and multivariate testing. Like everything else science-related, this article will explore a step-by-step, reproducible

method for increasing your conversion rate (the percentage of visitors converted to customers).

Step 1. Identify a Challenge

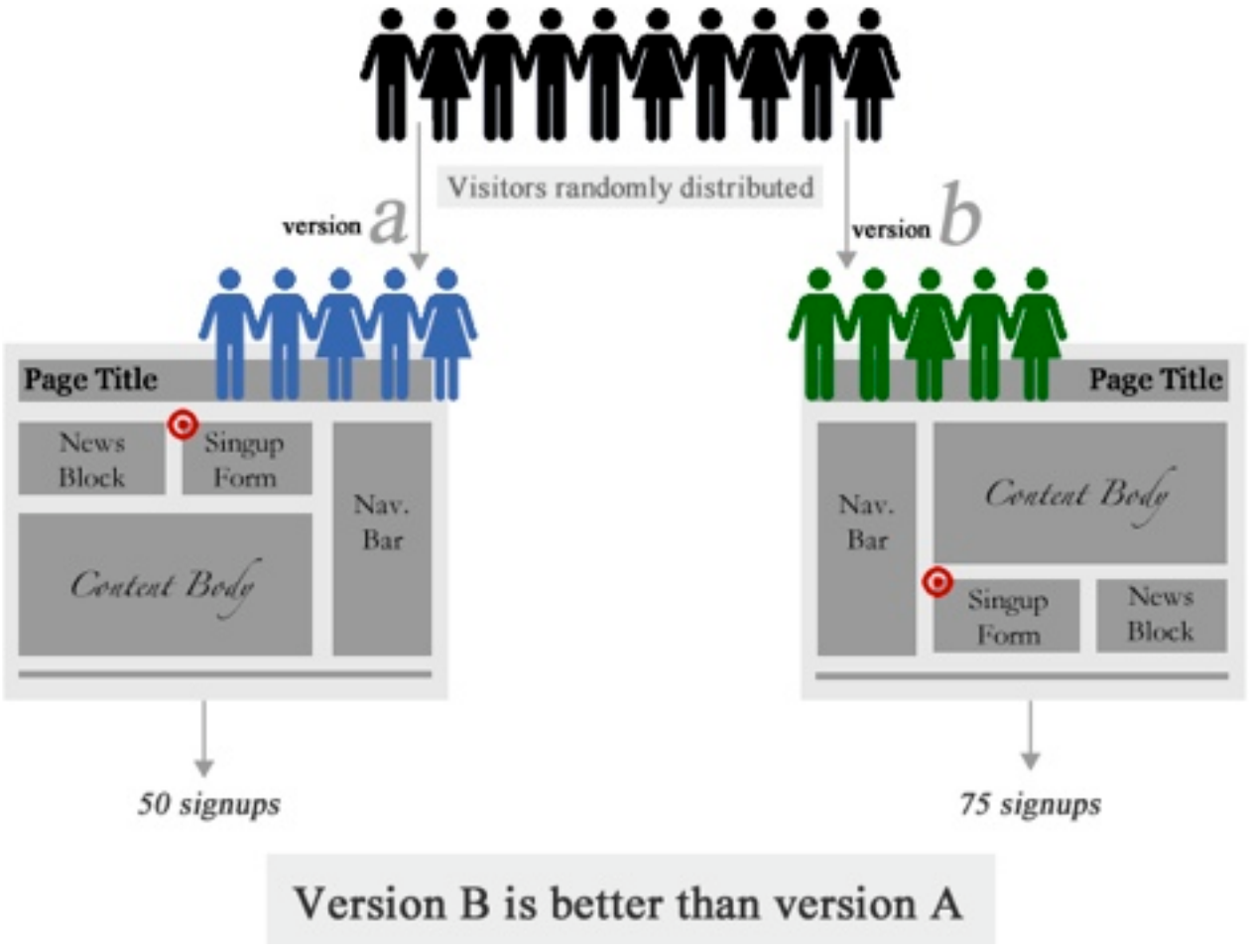
How to have website visitors notice your offering, then get them to act on it? I wanted to answer that million dollar question for a software download page on my personal homepage. That page had all the right ingredients: product name, product description, testimonials, awards, ratings and a prominent download link. Yet, only 40% of the visitors downloaded the free software. Note that almost all traffic on that page was targeted as it arrived, either through doing a Google search or via a relevant referring website. So, why didn't the remaining 60% of visitors download the software? Fixing that leaky bucket was my challenge.

PDFProducer v1.3
PDFproducer is a nice little utility which converts plain text into PDF documents. The benefit of this program is that it does not require Acrobat to be installed on the system. It means that it does not uses any component of acrobat to produce PDF files. As it is freeware you don't have to pay anything(but thanks) for producing PDF documents. Produce PDF files without having Acrobat. You can now change the page size also. It offers 90, 180, 260 and 360 degrees of rotation. It also offers a choice of 3 fonts which you can use in PDF document. Not to mention 3 types of predefined paper sizes. These all features make PDFproducer a nice little tool for quick PDF production.
What's new in Version 1.3?
Download
PDFProducer v1.3
Source code for PDFProducer v1.1
Back to Software Page
Awards
5/5 SOFTPEDIA pick
5/6
nonags.com

Key point: Clearly identify the goals of your website (or a particular Web page).

In my case, the desired action is to have visitors download the software and the challenge is to increase the download rate from 40% to as high as possible. Some of the most common challenges which can be solved using A/B split testing are:

- Improving sign-up rate, reducing bounce rate, increasing newsletter subscriptions,
- Increasing number of leads collected from landing page, increasing white paper or software trial downloads and
- Optimizing purchases and sales, converting a higher percentage of visitors to customers.



Quick overview: A/B Testing.

It is entirely possible that your website may be serving multiple purposes. An example would be a blog where the challenge is to get more

subscribers and to increase visitor engagement (in terms of number of comments). In that case, the best strategy is to tackle one (clearly defined) challenge at a time.

Step 2. The Hypothesis

The next step is to make a list of hypotheses for the low conversion rate (percentage of visitors taking the desired action). Agreed, it is tough to come up with exact reasons (that is why we are calling them hypotheses) for a low conversion rate, but there are three excellent resources to help you:

1. **You**: Yes, you! Though it is hard not to fall in love with one's own website, it is now time to be extremely self-critical. Try to step into your visitors' shoes and ask yourself, is your Web page compelling enough to engage a visitor with no background knowledge about your offering? Remember that unlike you, your visitors don't wake up in the morning saying, "Oh wow, this thing is fantastic!" Being critical towards your own website is an excellent way to improve it.
2. **Web analytics data**: Another source for getting a list of improvement ideas is your analytics tool. Specifically, data on referral sources and search keywords can provide interesting insights. For example, a lot of visitors may be arriving on your webpage by searching for keywords which you haven't even thought about. In that case, your visitors may leave the website mistakenly thinking that your offer is not what they were searching for. Addressing such cases can increase the conversion rate.
3. **Usability testing**: Getting independent feedback from a usability test will always surprise you! Perhaps you will discover that visitors are not even aware that you are offering something on the page. In that case, a

great idea would be to test the color and size of a prominent call-to-action. If you don't have a large budget for usability testing, try out affordable services such as Feedback Army or UserTesting.

Key point: Determine what influences conversion rate.

Take feedback from others but evaluate your Web page honestly, and jot down a list of ideas on what could be affecting conversions. For my software download Web page, I had a hypothesis that the download rate was low primarily due to two reasons: a) a lot of visitors didn't notice the download link and b) many didn't know that the software is free to download.

My guess was that a normal visit went something like this: a visitor arrives at the website, sees a bunch of text, looks around for the download link, somehow misses it (possibly due to uniformity in color of headings), and finally leaves the website. Those who notice the download link probably don't go to the trouble of reading the text, where it says "… is a freeware…", so they assume that the software is a trial or a demo.

The kinds of hypotheses you may have at this step:

- Maybe your sign-up form is too long, and a shorter version will help increasing total number of sign-ups?
- Maybe your "Free Trial" button isn't noticeable; will a larger button help in more downloads?
- Maybe your headline contains a lot of industry acronyms, or is too generic?
- Maybe your landing page has no obvious next step, which is leading to high bounce rate?

Step 3. A/B or Multivariate Testing?

Once your list of possible reasons for low conversion rate is ready, it is time to crank your brain once again to come up with different ideas for addressing those reasons. What you do in this step, is to come up with multiple different versions for all the factors you came up with in the last step. For the "Sign Up" case, for example, different versions will be:

- **Form variations**: Minimal form with just two fields; form not asking for email address; multi-step form; long form.
- **Submit button variations**: "Submit" or "Sign Up for Free" or "Instant Signup" or even "Sign Up Now!"

If you are skeptical that such minor differences cannot make any significant impact on conversions, read a case study where 37Signals increased sign-ups by 30% by testing a simple headline change.

A/B Split Testing

In A/B testing (also known as split testing), you vary only one element on the page at a time. This element may be any part of the Web page critical to conversions (e.g. button color, size, ad copy headline). Contrast this to multivariate testing, where multiple different elements are tested at a time. However, A/B tests are simpler and easier to implement than multivariate tests.

Multivariate Testing

In multivariate testing, you identify different sections/factors on a page which effect conversion rate. Different variations of those factors are created, which are then combined to give rise to multiple different versions

of the website. Multivariate tests take more time than A/B tests to show results, but are more likely to produce better results.

Key point: Create variations.

Conducting Tests

Coming back to the challenge of increasing downloads for the software page, I used my own tool, Visual Website Optimizer, that provides a visual interface for creating variations, but you could use other tools as well. An obvious solution to make visitors notice the download link is to make the download section the most prominent part of the page. In the page design, the "Download" heading size and color blended well into the rest of the page, which resulted in people missing the download link.

For the multivariate test, I selected two factors on the page for creating variations: the "Download" heading in the sidebar and the "PDFProducer" download link below it. The focus of the test was to observe the effect of the word "free," and the effect of highlighting the download section. Here are the variations I came up with for this test:

For "Download" headline:

- "Download" in red
- "Download for Free" in red
- "Download" in default color, but a larger font size

For "PDFProducer" link:

- "PDFProducer" in default color, but a larger font size
- "PDFProducer" in red

In a multivariate test, different variations are combined to produce multiple versions of the Web page. In this case, combining the above variations, a total of 12 (4×3) different versions were produced (automatically), each with a unique combination of "Download" headings and "PDFProducer" links (variation 1 is the control, or default, variation).

Different versions of the download section used in the multivariate test.

For definition's sake, because I have combined variations of two different sections, the test is called a *multivariate* test. If I had just varied a single section, say the "Download" heading, the test would have been called an A/B *split* test.

Key point: Define the goal of the test.

Every test has a goal against which the performance of different versions is measured. In this case, the goal was the number of downloads. Other types of goals may be sign-ups, purchases, clicks, leads, page views, or bounce rate. It is important to define the goal which is closest to your business objectives. For example, an e-commerce store optimizing for sales shouldn't define clicking on the "Add to Basket" button as a goal. Rather, it should define the goal as a visit to the "Thank you" page after a purchase is completed.

Step 4. Running the Test and Analyzing Results

What an A/B split or multivariate test does, is simple: whenever a visitor arrives on your Web page, it displays a randomly chosen version of the Web page. In other words, your traffic gets equally distributed amongst different versions. The performance of the different versions is tracked against the conversion goal(s) defined for the test. For example, in my case the goal was increasing the number of downloads; each time a visitor downloaded the software, Visual Website Optimizer tracked which Web page version was shown to the visitor. Setting up a test using this tool helped here as I could select the sections, make variations in a WYSIWYG editor, and immediately preview how it will look live on the page.

After a large number of visitors have been included in the test, different versions are compared to see which one of them performed the best and how much improvement (over the default) it achieved.

Key point: Analyze the results.

After running the test for about 4 weeks, I had results for my software download test. Can you guess which variation resulted in maximum downloads? Any guesses on how much improvement I was able to achieve over the existing 40% download conversion rate?

Hold your breath, here are the results:

#	DETAILS	CONVERSION RATE	% IMPROVEMENT	CONFIDENCE*
1	Default combination (control)	39,4%	-	-

10	"Download for Free" in red, default "PDFProducer" link	63,2%	60%	99%
9	"Download" in big font, "PDFProducer" link in red	56,5%	43,3%	98%
12	"Download for Free" in red, "PDFProducer" link in red	54,2%	37,7%	95%
...	...	...	...	...
2	"Download" as default, "PDFProducer" in big font	41,3%	4,76%	56%

Note: % improvement over default is calculated as `100*(Variation % – Control %)/(Control %)`
refers to the combination number as described in the screenshot above
Confidence*: Statistical confidence in beating the default combination.

You can observe that the headline "Download for Free" in red pushed the download conversion rate from 39% to 63%, a whopping increase of 60%. Having "Download" in large font size (combined with link color as red) also had a positive (43%) improvement over the default. Of all results, the top three are statistically significant at 95% or more confidence level. It means that I can safely implement winning versions on the Web page, to see a

permanent increase in downloads. Also note that even the worst performing combination has about a 4% improvement over the control, though it is not statistically significant.

A common concern is that the test results may not be reliable and that the improvement seen may be due to chance. It is, therefore, important to understand different parameters that influence reliability:

- Number of visitors: the higher the number of visitors, the more reliable the results. You can use tools such as a split test duration calculator, to estimate how many visitors will be required for your test.
- Conversion rate: in general, results for pages with a low conversion rate (say 1-2%) take a much longer period to produce statistically significant results, than pages with a higher conversion rate (say 40-50%).
- Difference in performance: testing with a large difference in the performance of variations (say >10%) is always more reliable than one where the difference is extremely small (0.5% or so).

It is important to either use a tool which automatically crunches the reliability of results for you, or to use online calculators to gauge the confidence in results. Taking unreliable results and implementing them can actually cause decreased performance.

Step 5. Learn From the Test Results

Irrespective of whether improved versions of your page are found or not, every test ends up with a good amount of learning. Here are a couple of key takeaways from my test:

- The word “Free” is a very powerful attention grabber. You are doing a sub-optimal job if you offer something for free, and don’t make that super-obvious on the page.
- Best location for advertising your “Free” offer is near (or on) a call-to-action. Like in this case, “Download for Free” is displayed quite close to the download link itself.
- This brings us to next important point: why not make the word “free” clickable? I am sure if I had analyzed the location of clicks on the page, I would have found a lot of visitors clicking on the “Download for Free” headline, only to realize it is not a link. I should have definitely tested a version with a clickable headline.
- The color red matters, but only if it is combined with other elements such as “Free” (or other effective call to action texts). Red may bring attention to your call to action, but if the text is not persuasive, the visitor will probably not take any action.
- The size of your call to action also matters. A larger size tells the visitor that you consider this particular section (in this case, downloading the application) more important than the other parts of the page.

Even if you don’t remember any of the points above, please take home one key point: don’t replicate the suggestions above without testing them on your website! Every website is unique, every conversion goal is different. While generic observations about the effect of the word “Free,” of the color red, and of the size of your call to action make logical sense, it is always wise to be sure of their effectiveness by setting up a quick test.

A/B split testing holds a lot of potential for positively impacting a company’s revenue and profits. In spite of that, surprisingly, adoption of testing is not that high. If you haven’t done any A/B split tests yet, why is that so? If you have done A/B split or multivariate tests in the past, please

share your experiences in the comments below so that others can get to know real-world examples.

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Rachel Andrew is a front and back-end web developer and Director of *edgeofmyseat.com*, a UK web development consultancy and the creators of the small content management system, *Perch*. She is the author of a number of web design and development books including *CSS Anthology: 101 Essential Tips*, Tricks and Hacks (3rd edition), published by SitePoint and also writes on her own blog. Rachel tries to encourage a common sense application of best practice and standards adoption in her own work and when writing about the web.

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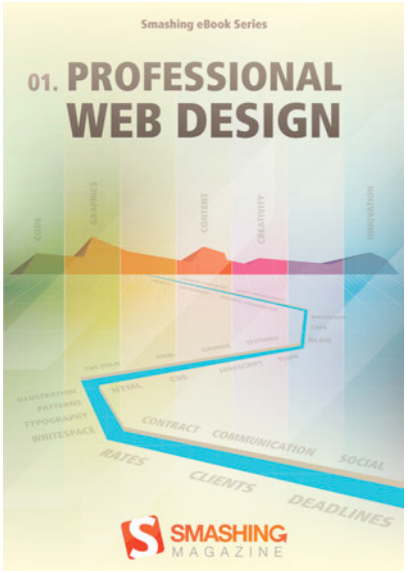

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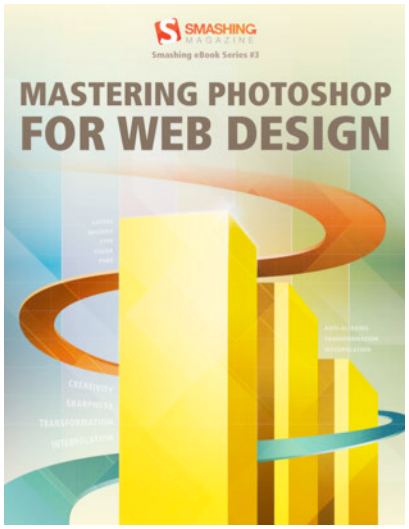

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